

Short-term Graduate Student Research Exchange Programs for Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages

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ABSTRACT

The authors developed and put into action a program which aims to explore effective foreign language teaching approaches through the joint effort of a short-term exchange program between graduate students of AUE (Aichi University of Education, Japan) and those of NCUE (National Changhua University of Education, Taiwan), with the goals of promoting graduate level research exchange, attaining a higher level of teaching research, and forging a research partnership. This program is supported by a Short Stay Program 2015, granted by the Center for International Exchange, AUE. The program mainly consists of five sessions including: lectures on English-language teaching, seminars on the cognitive-linguistic approach to English teaching and on Elementary School English Literacy Education in Japan, an English Teaching Roundtable sharing current English teaching issues with international teachers and researchers from Pakistan, Myanmar, Costa Rica, Indonesia, and Japan, a symposium concerning Effective Early Literacy Instruction for EFL learners, and supervising hours for a master's thesis and a doctoral dissertation provided by the involved professors. A summary of major academic sessions covered in this short-term graduate student research exchange program is provided in this paper. We hope that this program will play a certain role in sharing academic knowledge, broadening the participants' views, creating an international basis of research exchange, and strengthening both universities' partnership.

Keyword: Research Exchange, Teacher Development, Foreign Language Teaching, International Teachers, Short Stay Program, Early English Literacy Education

1. Introduction

This is a report on a Short-term Graduate Students Exchange Program between AUE (Aichi University of Education) and NCUE (National Changhua University of Education,

Taiwan) in Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages, which aims to explore effective foreign language teaching approaches through a short-term exchange program between graduate students of AUE and those of NCUE. The program is supported by a Short Stay Program 2015, granted by the Center for International Exchange, AUE, and it is a joint effort of Midori Inaba (Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language Department, AUE) and Feng-Lan Kuo (Graduate Institute of Children's English at NCUE, Taiwan).

The program covers five major topics: early English education, a cognitive-linguistic approach to English education, an English education roundtable, elementary English education in Japan, and effective early literacy instruction for EFL learners. They are discussed in more details below:

- (1) Lecture on Early English Education: Feng-Lan KUO, professor in Graduate Institute of Children's English at NCUE, Taiwan, gave a lecture on English-language teaching entitled "Elementary School English Education in Taiwan". She shared with participants the policy, teaching methodology and resources for early English education in Taiwan.
- (2) Seminar on the Cognitive-linguistic Approach to English Teaching: Takao IMAI, a doctoral student at AUE, introduced a self-developed image grammar for communication to the participants. He argued that image grammar is helpful for learners to understand English more deeply by activating their analogical abilities.
- (3) English Teaching Roundtable: On the agenda were the current situation of and issues in English teaching, programs, curriculums, textbooks, professional development, and challenges. The participants were Uzma JABEEN (Pakistan), Uzma KHAN (Pakistan), Memoona AZEEM (Pakistan), Myo WAI (Myanmar), Sigit WIYONO (Indonesia), Maria Jose RAMOS ALVARADO (Costa Rica), Wan-ting WENG (Taiwan), Yun Chu KO (Taiwan), Yu-shin HSU (Taiwan), Takao IMAI (Japan), and Yoshiro WATANABE (Japan). The moderators were Feng-Lan KUO and Midori INABA. Five international teachers talked about the current situation of and issues in English education in each home country. Participants exchanged opinions.
- (4) Seminar on Elementary School English Literacy Education in Japan: Yuki SAITO, a graduate student of English education at AUE, shared with the participants some parts of her master's thesis concerning English literacy education for elementary school children in Japan.

- (5) Symposium on Effective Early Literacy Instruction and ICT Material for EFL Learners: Panelists were Feng-Lan KUO (Professor in Graduate Institute of Children's English at NCUE, Taiwan), Wan-ting WENG, Yu-shin HSU and Yun Chu KO. They are graduate students at the Graduate Institute of Children's English at NCUE, Taiwan. The moderator was Feng-Lan KUO. The topics are Learner-centered Repeated Reading: Theory into Practice (Feng-Lan KUO), the Relationship Between Working Memory, Sentence Recall and Reading Comprehension (Wan-ting WENG), and Empirical Studies of the ABRACADABRA (Yu-shin HSU & Yun Chu KO).

2. Lecture

Feng-Lan KUO, professor at the Graduate Institute of Children's English at NCUE, Taiwan, gave a lecture on English-language Teaching entitled "Elementary School English Education in Taiwan". She started her talk with the implementation of elementary school English education for the fifth graders in the Taiwan context. Then she proceeded to talk about how native English teachers and local English teachers were recruited. Next, she discussed the issue of varying English learning hours at the elementary school level across cities and counties. Then she introduced the "one outline, multiple textbook editions policy" launched by Ministry of Education, Taiwan. Participants were also introduced to the four-skill elementary English learning competence indicators. She ended her talk on how phonics has been integrated into the reading programs in Taiwan's Elementary Education system. Since recently Japan has been rigorously seeking for enhanced English education at the elementary school level, her talk has provided the participating faculty members and students at English Department of AUE with many insightful ideas and thoughts regarding boosting English-language education in elementary schools in the context of Japan.

3. Seminar

3.1 Practice of Image Grammar for Communication in the Classroom

In this seminar, **Takao IMAI**, a doctoral student at AUE, shared with the professor and her students from other countries some parts of his doctoral dissertation that he is currently working on. The research assumption of his study is as follows: a) to verify that university students have not necessarily acquired native speaker intuition, which is often called Eigo no Kankaku (feeling for English); b) to demonstrate the utility of explicit instruction on Eigo no Kankaku by employing "Image English Grammar"; and c) to demonstrate that Image English Grammar makes learning English valuable and interesting for learners. Regarding these research assumptions, the results of the survey

he conducted to 335 university students to verify research assumption a) above were presented. The results demonstrated that the percentage of students who answered Image English Grammar questions correctly was generally less than 30%. Then, the method of teaching Image English Grammar for Communication is explained through several examples. The participants completed a questionnaire regarding their impressions about the learnability and teachability of Image English Grammar, and the results showed that most of them reported that Image English Grammar can be employed in their country in higher secondary and tertiary level English education.

3.2 Elementary School English Literacy Education in Japan

Yuki SAITO first referred to MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology)'s plan for the reform of English education as the background for her study. According to the plan, English will be taught from the third grade in activity-oriented classes once or twice a week, mainly instructed by homeroom teachers, to "lay the foundation for communication skills." By the time students reach the fifth and sixth grades, English will be an official subject conducted three times a week by qualified homeroom teachers or specialized language instructors with a focus on "fostering elementary command of English" (Kameda, 2013).

She is interested in how to foster primary English skills, including reading and writing, for fifth- and sixth-graders, and how to form the foundations of communication abilities through experiencing the joys of using English for third- and fourth-graders. She asserted that we needed to build the 'scaffolding' for third- and fourth-graders before they start 'reading' and 'writing' English.

As reading and writing are not currently taught directly, her research questions are 1) how to treat English 'letters' in elementary schools in Japan; 2) to investigate the relationship between the concepts of 'sounds' and 'letters' for third- and fourth- graders; 3) how to assess the understanding of the relationship between 'sound' and 'letter'; 4) the degree to which the connection is made between 'sound' and 'letter;' 5) if there is a difference between recognizing letters or guessing the reading, if a connection is made between 'sound' and 'letter;' and 6) what is an appropriate assessment for children's 'real' understanding of sounds and letters. These issues were discussed in the session, with international participants adding various viewpoints.

4. English Teaching Roundtable

4.1 The Role of English Language Education in Pakistan

Uzma KHAN first mentioned the role and status of Urdu & English in Pakistan. Urdu is

a national language and *lingua franca*, there are seventy-two regional languages in use, mainly in informal social interactions, and English is an official language and gatekeeper for entry into prestigious higher education institutions, high salaried jobs, the military, and the bureaucracy. The saying goes: “English is the passport to success and key to national progresses.”

KHAN referred to the government policy of English education, which says that soon after a government assumes power, it announces an English education policy to the masses as a way of achieving democratic ideals of equality of opportunity. The government has instructed all public sector schools to start teaching English from class I. The Higher Education Commission’s English Language Teaching (ELT) Reform Project aims to improve the teaching and learning of English in higher education institutions in Pakistan. More specifically, improving the teaching and learning of English ‘will help the graduates of public sector universities and institutions of higher learning to compete for good jobs in Pakistan.’ The challenges and issues are:

- (1) English as an examination subject: the primary function of teaching English in Pakistan is to prepare pupils for examination.
- (2) Linguistic inequalities: the Urdu-English Medium Divide in Pakistan has crippled the country’s education system.
- (3) Speaking and communications skills neglected: English taught in schools neglects speaking, listening and critical reading.
- (4) Teachers do not use English: English teachers in government schools tend to teach the language through the medium of Urdu as their own competence is poor.
- (5) Grammar and spelling drills: teaching amounts to nothing more than rote English spelling drills and some formal grammatical constructions.
- (6) Poor students, poor teachers: students who are poor in conversational and written English are poor teachers if they choose to enter the profession.

To properly prepare students, English education should target the following areas: academic use, inter-active use, communication in target areas of work, travel and study abroad, and meeting native speakers as well as speakers from ESL/EFL countries.

4.2 The Necessity for Cubiculum Development and Teacher Training in Pakistan

Uzma JABEEN brought up the importance of English ability to success in society. Along with Urdu, ‘the national language of Pakistan,’ English is the official language of Pakistan. Now, English has become necessary for “opportunity” and “progress,” as it is the language of power, being used as it is in almost the entirety of public and private sectors.

English has become a marker of elite status and the language of power. It is used in all aspects of society: the civil service, armed forces, the higher judiciary, universities, prestigious newspapers, radio, and entertainment. In general, a person who does not have knowledge of English is not considered educated in the truest sense of the world. English is the language of administration and is a compulsory subject at the school/college level. It opens the door to employment. Even in public schools, most subjects are taught in English, and higher education is taught entirely in English except for the study of the national language, Urdu, and regional languages and other foreign languages.

English has a vital role in Pakistan but English in Pakistan is taught under conditions which are far from satisfactory. English education in Pakistan faces numerous issues and challenges: lack of trained English teachers, unclear English curricular objectives in textbooks, inadequate material and facilities, inadequate oral practice, imprecise teaching methods, the underdeveloped examination system, inadequate professional development, and lack of in-service teacher training.

4.3 The Role of English Language Education in Costa Rica

Maria Jose RAMOS ALVARADO first referred to the role education plays in achieving high social status in Costa Rica. Education has become the most popular form of social climbing in Costa Rica. In a democratic country this represents an equal chance of opportunity as higher levels of education often leads to better job opportunities. The government invests 8% of the gross domestic product (GDP) into public education; this contributes to a better skilled labor force that impacts society positively. However, this change has not had the desired result, as new graduates are not competent enough in the English language, which impacts negatively on their performance and competitiveness when looking for a job. The need to find a solution has created some debates about the efficacy of the English methodologies used in the classrooms as well as the quality of professionals in charge of this duty in Costa Rica.

4.4 Major Issues of English Teaching in Myanmar

Myo WAI discussed the current issues facing English education in Myanmar. English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools from G-1 to G-11. This means that students learn English for 11 years in school. But when students finish high school, they cannot apply their English skills well in real situations. They lacked adequate communication skills. Public schools have been criticized for their failure in communicative language acquisition. Students with practical skills are required. Challenges and major issues include: 1) a need for practical communicative skills, 2) a need for fixed curriculum and textbooks, 3) a focus on reading & writing in the classroom, 4) the testing format and

system, 5) a need for communicative teaching methodology, and 6) a need for training courses and for maintaining teachers' motivation.

4.5 Challenges and Issues of Primary School English Education in Indonesia

Sigit WIYONO discussed the present situation of primary schools in Indonesia. In Indonesia, English is taught in primary school. However, in general, the results are not satisfactory. Students do not have competence in communication using the language, except for a few employees in government or private schools mostly in big cities. In these schools, students have relatively advanced English communication skills. This is due to better access to excellent learning resources, such as native English teachers, good textbooks/learning materials, and the good quality of schools in general. In big cities, too, it is quite common for students to take English courses after school or during weekends. Another exception can be found in the so-called "Pondok Pesantren" or "boarding school" where students stay at the school for 24 hours every day. They attend formal classes during the day and have night classes where they speak bilingually (i.e., English and Arabic) almost all the time. In this type of school, students' English competence is usually very good. The causes of the general low proficiency of English in Indonesia are: 1) a lack of qualified teachers, 2) inadequate exposure to the English language in daily life, and 3) the inequity between city and rural life resulting in a great difference in terms of schools, infrastructures, and access to better learning resources. Therefore, it is suggested: 1) provision of continuous upgrading systems for English teachers, 2) changing the focus of English teacher from grammar master to language communicator, 3) reducing the disparity of schools between urban and rural areas and between government and private schools by allocating more funds for the provision of learning resources of good quality and infrastructure.

5. Symposium

5.1 Learner-centered Repeated Reading: Theory into Practice

Feng-Lan KUO presented her research findings concerning learner-centered repeated reading. Her study examined young Taiwanese EFL learners' ORF and reading comprehension improvement after respectively receiving computer-assisted repeated reading (CARR), peer-assisted repeated reading (PARR), and teacher-assisted repeated reading (TARR) instruction by integrating both short vowels and long vowels into the training program. The research questions of her study are as follows: 1) Is CARR effective in improving young EFL learners' ORF and reading comprehension?; 2) Is PARR effective in improving young EFL learners' ORF and reading comprehension?; 3) Is TARR effective in improving young EFL learners' ORF and reading comprehension?; 4) Among CARR, PARR, and TARR, which one is more effective in improving young EFL

learners' ORF and reading comprehension?; and 5) What is the relationship between young EFL learners' ORF performance and their reading comprehension? Results showed that: (a) all three types of repeated reading were effective in enhancing Taiwanese EFL young learners' ORF and reading comprehension; (b) the PARR group made significantly more progress than the TARR group in ORF gain; (c) Ranking of three groups' gain scores across ORF and reading comprehension is consistent: PARR > CARR > TARR; (d) the three groups' ORF performance highly correlated with their reading comprehension; and (e) the participants' ORF performance served as a strong predictor of their reading comprehension.

5.2 Relationship Between Working Memory, Sentence Recall and Reading Comprehension

Wan-ting WENG presented the preliminary findings concerning the effects of working memory on elementary Taiwanese EFL students' sentence recall, using underlying working memory mechanisms identified in previous study to analyze the factors lift performance on sentence recall tasks (Alloway & Ledwon, 2014). The research questions addressed in this study are as follows: 1) Are there differences among visual phonological similarity group, visual no phonological similarity group, auditory phonological similarity group, and auditory no phonological similarity group in their sentence recall performance?; 2) What are the relationships among young EFL learners' reading comprehension, digit recall, nonword recall and sentence recall performances?; and 3) To what extent do digit recall, nonword recall and sentence recall performances predict young EFL learners' reading comprehension? Results revealed that neither visual phonological similarity nor auditory phonological similarity affected the participants' sentence recall performance. There were significant correlation between the participants' digits recall and nonwords recall performance, and between the participants' sentence recall and their reading comprehension. Furthermore, sentence recall was the only predictor of the participants' reading comprehension and could account for 47.2% of the variance in reading comprehension.

5.3 Effects of Two Implementations of Cross-age Repeated Reading Treatments on Facilitating Oral Reading Fluency

Yun Chu KO compared effects of two blended implementations, instructor-led and learner-led, of *ABRACADABRA* (*ABRA*) activities on improving learners' oral reading fluency (ORF). Twenty students were randomly assigned to receive instructor-led or learner-led cross-age repeated reading treatments. Forty three sight words and one reading article were practiced over a 6-week period by pairing a fourth grader and a fifth grader. With an average positive attitude of 84% for instructor-led group and 77% for learner-led

group, results revealed significant differences in: (a) instructor-led group was highly positive toward using ABRA story to facilitate their ORF; (b) tutees in instructor-led group highly agreed tutors' explicit recording of their decoding errors was useful in improving tutors' ORF; (c) instructor-led group considered ABRA story useful in enhancing their reading comprehension. It is likely unfamiliarity with ABRA activities and learners' low English proficiency resulting in learners' heavy reliance on teacher's guidance during cross-age repeated training.

5.4 Impact of Instructor-led vs. Learner-led Instruction on Enhancing EFL Young Learners' Acquisition of Sight Words

Yu-shin HSU gave a presentation concerning young EFL learners' acquisition of sight words. Her study compared the effectiveness between instructor-led instruction and learner-led instruction in promoting young EFL learners' acquisition of sight words through using *ABRA*. Participants were 45 third and fourth graders participating in an after class English program. Forty sight words selected from *ABRA* were practiced over a 6-week period. The results showed that the instructor-led and the learner-led instruction were equally effective and both groups made significant progress in decoding the sight words and in acquiring the meanings of the sight words.

6. Perspectives

The summary of the major academic sessions of this short term research exchange program were provided in this report. The reflection reports presented by the participants revealed that this program provided the participants with the following: the opportunity to share different approaches to English teaching, the latest research findings about English language education, and information on the current state of and issues with some countries' English teaching via face-to-face interaction. It suggests that these played a certain role in sharing academic knowledge, broadening the participants' views, and creating an international basis of research exchange. It is further hoped that this program will strengthen the partnership between AUE and NCUE.

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