

The Transitional Period toward the Complete Reform of English Education in Japanese Elementary Schools: From the Research of Watanoha Elementary School in Ishinomaki

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Abstract

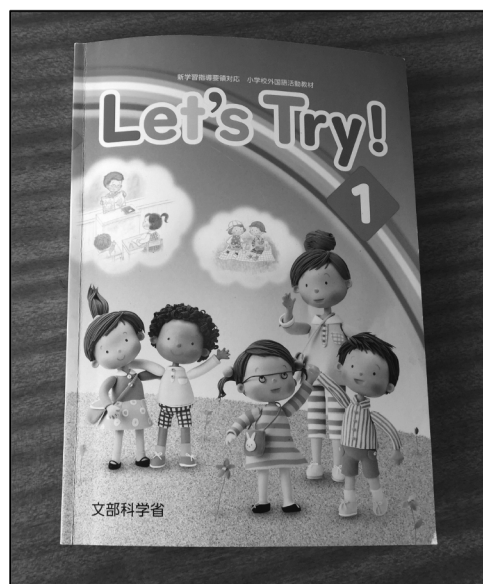
In 2020, English education in Japanese elementary schools will be drastically changed. Toward this reform, the period from 2018 to 2019 is a transitional and experimental one. This paper focuses on the English education in an elementary school in Ishinomaki. Through the interview with teachers and volunteers and the participant observations at Watanoha elementary school, this paper aims to clarify the current situation of English education in elementary schools and the problems toward the complete reform of English education.

Introduction

The English learning system of Japanese elementary schools is in a big transition. In 2020, English will become a mandatory subject for fifth and sixth graders, instead of a “foreign language activity” class where children are only expected to communicate in English by speaking and listening. In addition, the foreign language activity classes will become mandatory for third and fourth graders. These changes will result in Japanese elementary schools to doubling the annual number of English classroom hours to 70 from the current 35, and see reading and writing taught for the first time. The biggest change from before is that the evaluation of English will be compulsory for the teachers of the fifth and sixth grades’ classes. In other words, for the first time English will be equivalent to other subjects such as Japanese or Math in all Japanese elementary schools. These large structural reforms of English education were revealed in education guidelines by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in March 31, 2017.

MEXT showed the special treatments in the transitional period (2018-2019) to all the

Japanese elementary schools in advance of the complete reform¹. This guideline demands that schools guarantee 15 lessons per an year for the third and the fourth grade, and 50 lessons per an year for the fifth and the sixth grade. With regards to the contents of teaching, the contents of the new textbooks for the third to the sixth graders produced by MEXT have much more in-



[Figure 1 the transitional period's textbook for the third graders]

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formation than before (Figure1). These textbooks were made under the estimation of the complete reform in 2020 and it shows the model of the new textbooks that will be published by textbook publishers. Therefore the contents of the MEXT's textbooks currently used in elementary schools are equivalent to the future textbooks that will be used after the complete reform. As a result, most of the schools have to greatly increase much more English lessons, which requires considering and creating the new lesson plans in the current limited teaching conditions. This drastic change of English education in the Japanese elementary schools has become extremely controversial. Some people agree with the reform because the earlier a foreign language is taught, the better it generally is. Others resist it since Japanese as a subject should be given priority in the childhood, and children should not learn English before they understand the structure of Japanese completely. Also, many teachers are concerned about their English skills, and the burdens expected when English education will be introduced completely. Mainichi Shinbun conducted a questionnaire survey with elementary school teachers who were in charge of the fifth and sixth graders in 2016. The result shows that 45 percent of them are opposed to making English a subject².

This paper does not consider whether this reform is right or not. Instead, this paper focuses on the English education in the elementary school which was struck by the tsunami in Great East Japan earthquake in 2011. A number of researches and studies on the education in "Hisaichi" (which means the area attacked by the disaster) have been conducted until today. However, the English education in the elementary schools in "Hisaichi" has been mostly neglected.

This study is based on the fieldwork at Watanoha elementary school in Ishinomaki shi, Miyagiken. Interviews with the teachers, volun-

teers, and students, and the participant observations at this school are the research method of this study. Through these researches, this paper aims to clarify not only the current situation of the educational field, but also the problems facing the full reform of English education in Japanese elementary schools.

1. Watanoha Elementary School and Taylor's Reading Corners

Ishinomaki is in the northwestern Miyagi Prefecture, and it includes Watanoha area. Watanoha is a coastal area alongside the Pacific coast and has been known for its fishing port. There, the fish such as dabs, flounders, sea basses and squids have been caught in large quantities. So the Watanoha area has sustained Ishinomaki's basic industry to a considerable degree. Watanoha elementary school is a public elementary school of this area and it has been more than 140 years since its construction.

In the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, Ishinomaki was much damaged by the tsunami. Tsunami measuring over 10 meters flooded up to five kilometers inland. Nearly 15% of the city was flooded, destroying more than 50,000 homes and buildings, while many seaports and land transportation infrastructure were damaged. In Ishinomaki, over 3,100 people lost their lives, and over 400 people are still missing³. Watanoha area was also damaged dreadfully. This disaster took the lives of 7 students at Watanoha elementary school.

Due to the disaster, the building of Watanoha elementary school had to be repaired, so the students spent their school time in a temporary school building on the site of another school. After the renovation of Watanoha elementary school, its children and teachers came back to the renovated school building in 2014. Now the educational situation of this school has been almost normalized.

At the time of the disaster in 2011, an American

English teacher's life was sacrificed in the tsunami in Ishinomaki. Her name was Taylor Anderson. She came from Richmond, Virginia in 2008 and had taught as an Assistant English Language Teacher (ALT) in 7 schools in Ishinomaki. At the time of the earthquake in March 11 in 2011, she had been teaching in Mangokuura elementary school in Ishinomaki. She helped the students evacuate and she remained with 80 students who could not see their families⁴. She was staying with them and kept cheering, "Ganbatte" (means "Hang on!"). But after that, she was lost. It is thought that she lost her life on the way to her home⁵.

Taylor's father, Andy Anderson set up the Taylor Anderson Memorial Gift Fund with St. Catherine's High School where Taylor graduated in 2004. Throughout the United States he collected donations of books, CDs, and other educational materials for the schools in Ishinomaki where Taylor used to teach⁶. It was established the week of March 21st, 2011. In July 2014, this US NPO was taken over by a Japanese NPO as the Taylor Anderson Memorial Fund⁷. The books and other educational materials that the Fund donated to the schools in Ishinomaki are called "Taylor's Bookshelf". The Bookshelf itself was made by a woodworking carpenter, Shinichi Endo. He also lost his three children by the tsunami in 2011. He got stricken with sadness, and he thought that Gods did not exist in the world. Despite this, he decided to make Taylor's Bookshelf. He hoped that his efforts could be a comfort and memorial for his lost children, and the Bookshelf became the bridge between Japan and America⁸.

Watanoha elementary school where Taylor was teaching also has the Bookshelf (Figure2). In this school, about 400 English picture books that Taylor's Fund donated are kept in the bookshelf. In case of another tsunami striking, this bookshelf is located on the second floor.



[Figure 2 Taylor's Reading Corner in Watanoha elementary school]

2. The Efforts of Volunteers

Like many elementary schools in Japan, Watanoha elementary school also has a time for reading books aloud to children in the morning. In this school, the volunteer members of "Watage" have been playing a central role in the reading time.

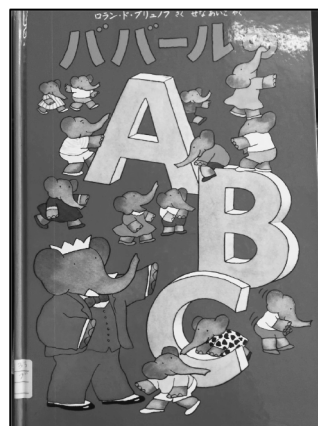
No matter whether the books are written in Japanese or English, storytelling activities have been verified to be meaningful for the children in the damaged area in Great East Japan Earthquake. For example, Takako Ikeda researched the activities of a PTA storytelling club of an elementary school affected by the nuclear disaster area⁹. She showed that the grass-root activities eased the children's uneasiness or stress¹⁰. That means in a disaster struck area where the teachers cannot ease the children's minds completely in the confusing situation, the existence of volunteers becomes meaningful.

In Watanoha elementary school, the morning reading has been conducted several times a month. The volunteers have been reading English picture books the Taylor's Fund donated to the school. In fact, other volunteer groups are also making good use of the English books of Taylor's Bookshelf in other schools in Ishinomaki.

Since elementary school children cannot understand the English books completely, the volun-



[Figure 5 alphabet magnets donated by the Taylor's Fund]



[Figure 7 picture book "Babar's ABC"]



[Figure 6 playing children by the alphabet magnets during the break time]

thing or advises to each student in English and Japanese.

Then, they sung the chants and the Alphabet song in the time with the CDs. Not only did they sing the ABC song from "A" to "Z", but Ms. Kimura ordered the students to sing from "Z" to "A". It was very difficult even for me, but they cheerfully sung the reversed ABC song, while seeing the alphabet charts.

Second, Ms. Kimura conducted English reading of the picture book donated by the Taylor's Fund. The book's title was "Babar's ABC" (Figure 7). The stories of the elephant Babar were written by a French writer, Jean de Brunhoff in the 1930's for the first time, and the series has been translated into English and many other languages including Japanese. The cute Alphabet



[Figure 8 Ms. Kimura reading picture book aloud to the students]

book shows the "A" is for Airport, or B is "Babar" for example. Children can imagine the English word even if they do not know the word due to association with the pictures.

This reading picture book activity included the students' activities. When Ms. Kimura showed the page of "L", she asked students "What is the word starts with 'L'?" . The students answered "Lion" or "Letter" with the clues of the pictures. Also, she said "let's make 'L' using your bodies!" Some of the students make "L" using their hands, and others sit and stretch their arms to make big "L"(Figure 9). A few students just stand up straight to make small "l".

After that, another activity was conducted. To



[Figure 9 making big "L"]

the tune of ABC chants and songs, they are ordered to stand up when each initial of their name is called. They were so excited to join these activities.

The final activity of this class was "let's make your initial using stamps". Actually, some of the stamps' sets were donated by the Taylor's Fund. They are not accustomed to using stamps and had troubles to affixing the stamps. However, they seemed happy to finally complete their initials using alphabet stamps.

The class activity of Ms. Kimura's class was so exciting, and many of the students wanted to continue English games even after the class. The main purpose of introducing English to third graders in Japanese elementary schools is to let them get close to English and enjoy it. From this viewpoint, Ms. Kimura's class is an example of a successful case. Though, the success largely depends on Ms. Kimura's English teaching skills and the benefits of the Taylor's Fund.

4. Problems in the Educational Field during the Transitional Period

As a teacher in charge of English education in Watanoha elementary school, Ms. Kimura has a lot of trouble and anxiety. Despite the number of English classes being increased, basically the homeroom teacher teaches English in most elementary schools. So there is a difference between the teachers in the aspects of the skills

and motivations. In Watanoha elementary school, an ALT teacher comes several times a month like other schools. There are some teachers who cannot communicate with the foreign teacher enough, so those teachers often get stressed. As a result, the person who can teach English well has a big burden regarding English education.

In order to improve the scarce manpower with regards to English education in elementary schools, MEXT provides guidelines for the transitional period, and recommends the use of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program (JET) and reliance on ALTs as much as possible. However, it is not so easy because the local governments have to conduct these programs. The reform of Japanese elementary schools' English education cannot succeed without stable infrastructure.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined the current situation of the English education in the transitional period in Ishinomaki. While many elementary schools are confused regarding how to confront the reform of English education, Watanoha elementary school manages to introduce English class to the third graders successfully. In the case of Watanoha elementary school, the English education is largely dependent on the skill of Ms. Kimura. Moreover, this school can use the benefit that the Taylor's Fund gifted. Regarding that point, we could say that the negative legacy that causes a lot of damage in the disaster of 2011 is turning into a positive legacy due to the late Taylor and the activity to inherit her will.

Through this research, the problems facing complete reform of English education became clear. The elementary schools are striving to secure times for English lessons with limited teaching staffs. Moreover, many teachers have much anxiety to teach English to the children, since some elementary school teachers do not

have enough skills to teach English. On the website of MEXT, they explain the background to reform as below;

Amid ongoing globalization, the development of students' proficiency in English, a common international language, is crucial for Japan's future. Japanese people should expect to achieve top-level English proficiency in Asia. Under the reform of English education, not only the cultivation of fundamental knowledge and skills, but also such abilities as to reason, make decisions or express oneself in order to solve problems by oneself will be inevitable.

A lot of improvements and changes will be taking place from now on due to the current Course of Study. However, there are still a lot of issues to be tackled especially in the development of communication skills. With an eye to the year 2020 in which the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games will be held, the government will proceed with studies on the new reform of English education throughout elementary, junior high and high schools so that the reform will be performed in a stepwise fashion.

In parallel, the government will also implement some efforts in preparation for the reform and promote the reform in an advanced manner¹¹. (The underlines were added by the author)

As the above sentences clearly show, for the Japanese government, behind the English education reform is the need to confront globalization. Also, MEXT explicitly refers to the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, and it seems to be one of the most important motivations for the Japanese government to accelerate the reform of English education. However, when we think of the children, teachers and parents, globalization or the Olympics are not the main motivation to learn or teach

English. This large reform of English education is not the problem limited to the educational field, but a problem all us Japanese have to consider, and many more arguments seeking for the best way are needed.

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- 5 Terashima, 33-43.
- 6 Terashima, 55.
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