

# Emerging EFL Communicative Competence of Japanese Children

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The starting hypothesis for the study was that with an appropriate learning environment (instructional system and instructional methods) young children will rapidly reach a stage of pre-communicative competence in the acquisition of English. The subjects of the observation were 22 six-year old Japanese children, the environment was an international school, teachers — foreign nationals and the language of instruction English. One week course exposed children to English seven hours a day through English lessons, music, sports, as well as informal interaction with foreigners while swimming, at lunch time or on the playground. The evidence provided shows that emerging EFL pre-communicative competence is observable. The evidence also shows that the final assumption of the observable criteria needs adjustment. The adjustment points out three distinct stages children go through in acquiring communicative competence. The first stage is the innate stage, the second the one easily acquired with simple instruction, and the third stage, the signs of which are not observable, is recommended for a long-term instruction. The implications of the research take into account contemporary changes in policies and practices of English language education in Japan.

**\*emerging \*communicative competence \*pre-communicative competence**

## I. Introduction

### Preamble — Purpose of the Study

Mother: “How can a concerned mother facilitate her child’s learning of language?”

Roger Brown: “Believe that your child can understand more than he or she can say, and seek, above all, to communicate.”

This quotation from Roger Brown (1977) has been chosen to precede the report of this study because it succinctly states the thesis of the study. The research generated with the study is exploring and observational in nature and covered three one-week periods during which six-year-old Japanese students were exposed to learning

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English as a foreign language in a particular learning environment. The starting hypothesis for the study was that with an appropriate learning environment (instructional system and instructional methods) young children will rapidly reach a stage of pre-communicative competence in the acquisition of English.

In the context of contemporary questioning and change in policies and practices of English language education in Japan, and the clear movement towards a more communicative approach in the curriculum and the classroom, it is submitted that studies which investigate age and the development of communicative competence in Japanese learners might help the classification of such policy and practices. Towards that end, this research has been planned, and this report respectfully submitted for scrutiny.

## II. Context

### A. Learners

In three one-week courses the research focused on 22 children, 11 boys and 11 girls. They were chosen on the basis of not being exposed to formal English instruction whatsoever prior to the course being undertaken.

### B. Learning environment

#### 1. *Setting*

The course was held on the grounds of St. Mary's International School, which in its appearance resembles any elementary or high school in the USA.

#### 2. *Teachers and assistants*

The class had a teacher and three assistants to allow the students' optimal exposure to English. In music, sports and swimming classes, the students were exposed to a variety of teachers, a variety of "Englishes" and a variety of cultures.

#### 3. *Access to English*

The language communication was in English only. Occasional students' input in Japanese is tolerated for the reasons that will be discussed in the explanation of the data.

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### III. Analysis of data with examples

#### A. Criteria for communicative competence

The following criteria represent the simplified and adapted version of the ones Michael McTear (1985) suggested in his book *Children's Conversation*.

1. Turn-taking
2. Interrupting
3. Initiating conversation
4. Responding
5. Giving an appropriate response
6. Giving a minimal predicted response
7. Response plus additional content
8. Other appropriate response
9. Eye contact
10. Physical contact
11. Pointing, showing
12. Vocatives
13. Non-verbal request
14. Direct imperatives
15. Need statements
16. Unanalyzable wholes
17. Responding to requests for repetition
18. Responding to requests for confirmation
19. Other-correction
20. Self-repair

The analysis of the subjects' daily performance as to the fulfillment of the criteria for communicative competence can be summarized in the following percentages (indicating the number/percentage of students who could satisfy the criteria from the very beginning — emerging naturally, later in the week — with simple instruction, or the signs of it could not be observed in the course and are therefore suggested for later.)

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**Communicative competence**

	emerges naturally	possible w/simple instruction	impossible, suggested for later
turn-taking	86.36%	13.64%	0.00%
interrupting	0.00%	40.91%	59.09%
initiating conversation	4.54%	59.09%	36.36%
responding	68.18%	31.82%	0.00%
appropriate response	45.45%	54.55%	0.00%
minimal predicted response	77.27%	22.73%	0.00%
response + additional content	0.00%	0.00%	100.00%
other appropriate response	0.00%	9.10%	90.90%
eye contact	45.45%	54.55%	0.00%
physical contact	9.09%	59.09%	31.82%
pointing, showing	27.27%	72.73%	0.00%
vocatives	4.54%	45.45%	50.00%
non-verbal requests	0.00%	77.27%	22.73%
direct imperatives	0.00%	18.18%	81.82%
need statements	4.54%	90.90%	4.54%
unanalyzable wholes	0.00%	90.90%	9.10%
responding to req. for rep.	86.36%	13.64%	0.00%
responding to req. for con.	72.73%	7.27%	0.00%
other-correction	9.10%	18.18%	72.73%
self-repair	4.54%	9.10%	86.36%

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Criteria that are not observable at this age level and for the available time span, according to the research, seem to require higher metalinguistic and sociocultural ability, and are therefore recommended for the older children and lengthier instruction.

Interrupting, vocatives and direct imperatives might be regarded as culturally influenced, keeping in mind the fact that communicative competence includes acquisition on the sociocultural level, too. It might be against culturally accepted norms in the Japanese society to interrupt while someone is talking, to call the teacher by her/his first name, or to give orders. The low percentage of direct imperatives might be due to the lack of available lexis to operate with. It is hypothesized that these three criteria and the acquisition of them will significantly depend on the child's personality and upbringing.

Some examples of the children's conversations with their observers or the fellow students will now be discussed in terms of the above mentioned criteria.

1. Turn-taking: The examples show children's awareness of the process.

Emi : Paper, please.  
Teacher : Which color would you like?  
Emi : Green.  
Teacher : Here you are!  
Emi : Thank you!

2. Interrupting: Ryotaro interrupted to finish the interaction on behalf of his friend because he probably felt that was the most natural thing to do.

Teacher : Masateru, this is red? (pointing to a blue pencil)  
Masateru : (looks puzzled)  
Ryotaro : Blue!

3. The following example of initiating conversation shows that even with a limited vocabulary the students show willingness to start a conversation. Subjects do that by calling the teacher's name, drawing attention to something or expressing a need.

Mayuko (shows the teacher her unsharpened pencil) : Oh, no!

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4. Examples of responding show that any answer should be acceptable as long as the input is in English.

Teacher : Erika, how many stars can you see?

Erika : *Ichi, ni, san, shi, go, roku, shichi...* seven!

5. Examples of giving an appropriate response can be found in many items, and here is an example where a student gets the teacher's hint and responds appropriately:

Teacher : Ryoko, I like this rabbit. (hugs the stuffed animal)  
What do you like?

Ryoko : Ice-cream!

6. Examples for giving a minimal response vary, and here is a simple one where a student uses a simple negation to answer the question. (It is predicted in that there are only two possible predicted answers — yes or no):

Teacher : Yuya, are you going swimming today?

Yuya : No, swimming, no!

7. Examples for response plus additional content could not be observed.

8. Examples for other appropriate response were scarce. Although some of the answers were not in the target language, they should be accepted knowing that the child operates with available means.

Teacher : Koki, what are you drawing?

Koki : *Semi tomatteru no. /Cicada that landed./*

Teacher : Is this a tree?

Koki : *Un. /Yes./*

Teacher : Draw some grass!

Koki : *Kusa? Ato de! /Grass? Later! /*

9. Eye contact can be observed whenever a child wants to draw his or her attention to him/herself or an object.

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Risa : (pulling teacher's arm) Nena, good morning!

Teacher : Good morning!

10. Physical contact, however rare in the Japanese culture can be observed among the children.

Teacher : (points to a picture) This is Nena! (wrong!)

Kaori : (looks puzzled; after a while pulls the teacher's arm) Kazumi!

11. Pointing and showing help the children make sense of the world around them, and the following example shows that:

Risa : (getting the teacher's attention by tapping her arm, showing her a picture)

Teacher : Who is this, Risa?

Risa : Nena! (the teacher)

12. In case of vocatives, the student adds *sensei* to the teacher's first name (contrary to the Japanese tradition)

Maki : Nena sensei! (gives her a pencil)

Teacher : Is this yours?

Maki : No!

13. Items in pointing and showing section can also be regarded as non-verbal requests.

14. The imperatives are easiest to obey if they are direct and explicit but, as can be seen from the following example, they can be implicit, too:

Suguru : Finished!

Teacher : Pardon me?

Suguru : Finished!

Teacher : Can I have it?

Suguru : (nods and gives it to the teacher.)

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15. Examples for need statements show that the children can find a way to express their need, being highly susceptible to “here-and-now”.

Ryoko : I am hungry!

Teacher : (points to her watch) Soon it will be lunch time!

Ryoko : (smiles)

16. As expected, children enjoy learning unanalyzable wholes and they were found using them quite often.

Teacher : See you tomorrow!

Mayuko : See you!

17. Repetition has multiple meanings for children. In the following example, the student is repeating but at the same time confirming that he knows the right answer:

Teacher : What are you making?

Takashi : *Nagagutsu.* /Boots./

Teacher : What color are you going to paint them?

Takashi : ?

Teacher : Green, right?

Takashi : Green!

18. Responding to requests for confirmation (item 17)

19. Other-corrections are scarce for this age group, but they do occasionally occur:

Teacher : What's *ichigo* in English?

Mari : Apple!

Erika : No, strawberry!

20. The same goes for self-repair.

Teacher : What is this? (points to a dog)

Harumi : /dagu/,no, /da:g/

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### IV. Conclusions and implications

In regard to the environment where the learning took place, it can be concluded that there was no poverty of stimulus problem, and although one is aware of the fact that we are talking of foreign language acquisition and not second language acquisition, as far as the immediate need for language production is concerned, the closest we can get is to make the learning process as spontaneous as possible.

Although the teaching of kinesics and proxemics and other aspects of non-verbal communication is hardly feasible in the average classroom set-up, it is believed that the environment and the way the course is set up encourage natural acquisition of those, too.

At the age of six, children are not able to produce sentences in English as spontaneously as they would do in their mother tongue, but the words they do know in English, they use communicatively. The students at the pre-communicative stage cannot produce questions, but can comprehend them and act accordingly. The idea that the subjects of our study are not aware of the structure, points to the fact that their successful management of the communication, to a certain extent, is a sign of their emerging communicative competence.

The final conclusion resulting from this research concerns L1 acquisition. In L1 acquisition, children seem to go through stages of imitation, substitution etc. In foreign language acquisition, according to this research, these seem to be taken for granted, even before the course began. In other words, children starting a foreign language are already equipped with this ability. They already have basic communication skills, and what we, as instructors can do, is try to build on what already exists. It can be hypothesized that the process will be shorter than acquiring an L1.

What are the implications of this research? As stated in the preamble, this study investigated age and the development of communicative competence in young Japanese learners. In the context of contemporary changes in the Japanese system of education, especially in deciding whether English should become part of the syllabus in primary schools, this study might help demonstrate that a communicative approach is both feasible and rewarding with young learners.

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