

An Analysis of Three Pilot Shared Reading Programs

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[Abstract] English education for young learners is a growing part of the field of foreign language education in Japan. Recent years have shown a rapid growth in both language school courses for young children, the founding of immersion pre-schools and the introduction of English and global studies courses at elementary schools. Approaches to teaching young learners tend to follow popular and well-researched ones in other parts of the world and include such humanistic methodologies such as whole language, Steiner and Waldorf. In recent decades, the inclusion of parental support as a means to enhance and support children's education has gained recognition as an effective way to raise well-educated children. Three pilot programs that incorporate this practice have been established in Japan by the author. This paper outlines the structure of these programs, analyses the cultural applicability of foreign practices and highlights the benefits and challenges that each program has faced.

[Key words] Teaching methodology, TESOL, young learners, parental involvement, pre-literacy, shared reading, bilingual education.

1 Introduction

The field of early childhood English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programs is growing at a rapid pace. More and more Japanese parents are opting to enroll their pre-school aged children in private language classes and English immersion kindergartens. Shifting dynamics in the needs of this field are forcing educators, institutions and publishing houses to explore different approaches to teaching and adopt overseas practices and materials to the Japanese market.

The author of this study has been involved in early childhood EFL education in Japan for over sixteen years and has witnessed tremendous changes and shifts towards the usage of storybooks and whole language learning, applications of learner development theories such as Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences (1993), and integration of skills in classes for even the youngest of learners. Evidence of these shifts can be seen in the open email forums and highly professional quality of the journal, *Teaching and Learning with Children*, of the Japan Association of Language Teaching's Teaching Children Special Interest Group as well as the professional activities of English Teachers in Japan (ETJ).

The next step in this field in Japan is currently underway with a recent growth in university departments for training EFL teachers of young children. With this achievement, more research should be expected. Currently, studies are being undertaken at the elementary level, yet studies concerning English education for preschoolers

is a new research area. The author's interest in this relatively unexplored area led her to create three preliminary pilot programs in order to establish a base of experience in order to embark on longitudinal studies. This paper aims to outline the results of these three programs that are based on the overseas practices of shared reading and parental involvement in their children's pre-literacy development.

2 Literature Review

Given that extra-curricular programs in Japan are typically set up for four sessions a month, the issue of parental involvement and follow up in the home is essential. In the field of literacy development, there is a movement for active parental involvement and cooperation with schools in the preparation for and instruction of reading in the home. Educational research shows that parents play a central role in their children's academic success (Chavkin, 1993; Christenson & Conoley, 1992). For pre-literacy learning, the more parents read books with their children and expose them to print before they enter school, the more successful they are in learning to read and write as well as achieve high results in later academic work (Baker, 2001; Cullinan, 2000; Cummins, 1993; Jimenez et al., 2006; Wolfendale & Topping, 1996). Furthermore, research clearly shows the benefits of parents reading picture books with their infants and toddlers and the benefits of parental training in how to maximize the learning opportunities and development of communication and thinking skills (Morrison and Cooney 2002; Parkes 2000; Senechal and LeFevre 2007; van Kleek 2007). The results of these studies supports the author's premise that intervention training programs may be an effective way to conduct English studies in Japan.

As Bernice Cullinan (2002) emphasizes in her book *Read to Me: Raising Kids Who Love to Read*, literacy development requires a partnership between school and parent. Hannon (1996, p. 63) urges parents to begin their involvement in family literacy during their children's preschool years as schools' often hold a "narrow conception of literacy (reading...to the neglect of writing)" and queries that we "might be missing an opportunity to work with parents at the time it is likely to be most beneficial – just as the foundations of literacy are being laid."

Along with studies of using shared reading for supporting the development of children's primary language, some studies have focused on English as a second or foreign language (Jimenez et al., 2006) and illustrate specific intervention training techniques and programs to support parents in their efforts to communicate effectively with their children during shared reading (Parkes 2000; Spreadbury 1998). Considering that English is a foreign or second language for children in Japan, home support for language arts and literacy skills becomes even more crucial.

Aside from the issue of English as a foreign language in Japan, the needs of international families who are struggling to raise their children bilingually while living in Japan need to be addressed. Arnberg (1979), in her study of Swedish-English families, found that it is difficult for a child to become a true bilingual while living in a country where one language is used dominantly, even if the minority language is of high status, as is English in Japan. Grosjean (1982) asserts, however, that the task of raising a bilingual child becomes more of a possibility "if the child belongs to a cohesive linguistic minority with monolingual speakers and if the minority language is used in various social activities." (p. 176). If support does not readily exist in the public school system and

English-speaking families are demographically scattered, creating a social structure within the local community, thus, would seem to be an attractive and viable option for parents. Baker (2000) assesses that when the minority language is not supported at school, home usage may not suffice for language development and maintenance. In these circumstances, he recommends the creation of a 'local community group' to offer extra schooling, possibly on Friday evenings, during holidays, and in Saturday schools (p. 85).

It is often said that it is very difficult to instruct your own child and that support from peers and other parents can often be much more effective (Wolfendale & Topping, 1996; Topping, 2001). As Topping further describes:

[T]he notion of 'parental involvement in children's reading' has been replaced by the term 'family literacy', which implies greater emphasis on practices which enhance the literacy levels of the whole family now and in the future, ... This implies respecting the home culture and not merely seeking to export the school culture... (Topping, 2001, p.1)

As one of the most difficult problems parents face in educating their children in English here in Japan is having access to lots of quality, age and level appropriate books for their children to read at home, the prospect of creating a learning center where parents could access books and educational materials seemed to be the most desirable format. Of course, the Internet and satellite television can also provide quality educational input of the minority language for children being raised in a monolingual culture (Caldas, 2006). In addition to the materials support, meeting regularly with a group of people who are in a similar circumstance to share ideas, concerns as well as engage in learning activities may be the deciding factor in whether parents are successful in helping their children become bilingual (Baker, 2000).

3 Programs and participants

The author founded and coordinated three literacy-based EFL programs, one of which started in November 2004 while the other two began in March 2006. All three were under the direction of the Wordland English Library and Literacy Center, a not-for-profit center that was created as a base for these three groups for the interim period of February 2006 to October 2007.

The first is a cooperative study group, Rainbow Families, for supporting international parents (bi-national couples, foreign couples and returnee families) in their efforts to raise their children bilingually with English and Japanese, and in particular, to support their children's pre-literacy and literacy development. Participation in the past three years has ranged from seven to eleven families at any one time. This group met for 1 ½-2 hours on Saturdays, about 42 times a year plus special events like Christmas and Halloween. It was founded as a *bunko*, or book lending service and support group, so parents and children had access to many high quality English books.

The second program is a parent-child training program for Japanese families to support their efforts to study English as a foreign language at home. Families gathered weekly (42 times a year) to be introduced to the study program materials. The instructor modeled ways to practice and alternated between working directly with the children and training parents on reading techniques, rhythm and pronunciation, etc. A total of 10 families

participated, 5 for 1½ years and 5 for six months. For nine of the families the mother accompanied their child/ren, and for one family the grandmother participated. From time to time the grandmother of some of the children would attend when the mother could not. Twelve children, ranging from 3 to 8 years old, participated.

The third program is a shared reading program at a pre-school (*hoikuen*) where the teachers followed up on the English program. All the students, teachers, staff and some parents gathered in the auditorium for a monthly 45-minute program where the English materials and activities were introduced. All materials included CDs so teachers could follow up easily during the interim period. The children ranged from infants to five years old. There were 57 children in all and 6 teachers. Often, the principal and nutritionists also attended and parents were invited to come, resulting in one or two attendees.

The common factor in all three programs is that the parents or teachers were empowered to work with their children in English as a result of the program and training. Access to quality English books and educational material was provided as well as support and training in how to use them effectively with the children.

As for instruction, I took on the role of academic adviser and coordinated all of the programs with the assistance of three other colleagues who aided in the instructional duties for these programs. I participated in instruction as much as time allowed, and others worked in various capacities in teaching the Japanese family groups and preschool program. As the international group's format did not require an instructor, no instructor was necessary.

4 Research questions

The author's main purpose in creating these programs was to assess the cultural adaptability of overseas practices to the Japanese circumstances and to evaluate the successes and difficulties of creating and maintaining such programs. It is not within the scope of this study to evaluate quantitatively the English improvement of the children and parents in these programs.

This paper aims to illustrate and analyze the following aspects of each program: (1) Procedures; (2) Benefits; and (3) Challenges and Cultural issues.

5 Method

The data compiled for this participant-observer case study is based upon my diary and reflections in planning, organizing and leading these programs. Questionnaires completed by the adult participants of the three programs, as well as informal and formal interviews with the adults.

Creating Rainbow Families was the first stage in the Wordland Literacy Project, whose concept is currently comprised of several concentric circles: International families bilingual education support group, Japanese families English as a foreign language groups, an English library, and a preschool English as a foreign language programs. This project and longitudinal study will entail future data collection and analysis of bilingual education and support for international families, English as a foreign language education and support for Japanese families, parental training, and promoting the love for reading. Although the current data is limited in scope, it is a critical step in this project to document and analyze the three programs from a structural point of view.

6 Program 1: International Families Group (Bilingual education)

6.1 Procedures

As Rainbow Families is a volunteer, parent-led support group, setting up a format was rather challenging as most of the parents were not educators and lacked confidence in leading activities during the study sessions. But, parents gradually gained confidence and after 10 months of establishing Rainbow Families were able to successfully create a system where families rotated responsibilities for preparing a thematic, book-based program for each session. Up to that point, preparation and leading activities were primarily done by my partner and myself, with occasional input from others. However, once families started sharing leadership duties, there seemed to be a sudden spurt of energy and ideas.

Goals

1. To foster pre-literacy skills for toddler to kindergarten-aged children.
2. To develop reading skills for elementary school children.
3. To promote storybook reading in the group and at home.
4. To provide a forum for interaction and exchange amongst international families.

Program

● Theme song

- We started the session with *Books are Fun* (Barney,1999) which was the theme song of the group.
- We also periodically added a song which promoted self-respect or respect of others like, *I Like Me* (Barney,1999) or *The Sharing Song* (Raffi,1976).

● Show and Tell

- Children take turns sharing something small with the group. (A card from Grandma, a craft from preschool, etc.)

● Circle Reading

- Families would check out up to three books a week that they would read to or with their child on a daily basis.
- Parents or children who could read would choose one book to read to the group.

● Thematic activities

- The parent(s) in charge of the session would choose a theme, either based on a book or otherwise. They would read a book related to that theme and lead activities to expand upon it.
- These activities included songs, crafts, quizzes, games, added information, etc.
- Often, activities were adapted for the age of the child. For example, older children did more writing while toddlers only colored.

● Songs and finger plays

- All families had the CD and book set *Wee Sing Children's Songs and Fingerplays* (Conn Beall & Hagan Nipp, 2005).
- Toddlers focused on short songs and rhymes which had accompanying pictures or easy to follow finger or body movement.

● **Snack time**

- The parents in charge of the session also brought simple snacks for the children and parents to share.
- Families used this time to talk about issues related to international life in Japan, children's education, organizational issues for the group, etc.

● **Additional activities**

- Periodic gatherings and events for celebrations, play and storytelling.
- Some events, like Christmas, allowed international families to celebrate in ways that are not usually done in Japan. Other events, like Halloween and storytelling sessions also included Japanese families in the other groups so they could share learning and using English together.

Maintaining an element of fun and spontaneity in this program has proven indispensable. Including crafts, plays, songs, outdoor activities as well as occasional gatherings such as Christmas, a time that can be very lonely and when family traditions from the home country are deeply missed, can make all the difference in the success of a community-based educational program.

6.2 Benefits

For all families who have participated, the children and parents enjoy the opportunity to interact with others in similar circumstances. As the families tend to be distant geographically, without such an organized meeting, it would be difficult to interact with many other families who are English/Japanese bilinguals. For the parents, they can consult and empathize with other parents who are facing similar issues concerning living abroad, international marriages, raising their children bilingually, bullying of international children, etc. For the children, interaction with other international children helps them build a strong, secure identity. In this group, everyone has a different ethnic background or cultural experiences and uses a mixture of languages, so instead of being different than their peers as they may at their Japanese school, they are very similar to their Rainbow Family friends.

After this group had been meeting for nearly a year, many parents started to openly express how the group was positively influencing their children's language development, bonds with other international children and families, as well as parent/child communication.

- One American father who had become quite animated and proficient in his storytelling and book reading skills admitted that not only had he not read to his toddler, he had primarily spoken to her in Japanese for fear that she could not understand his English. Now, he enjoyed singing our group's songs in the car during their commute, reading to her at night, and I noticed that their communication was gradually shifting to English. (Note: After two years of participation, this happy father/daughter duo often engaged in turn taking when reading their library book to the group.)
- Other families expressed appreciation for the opportunity to interact with others who were equally concerned with bilingual education and other issues facing international families. The group's role seemed to expand from strictly education-based to one of whole family support.
- Children demonstrated growing enthusiasm for attending the Saturday sessions. They were excited to share

their little treasures during Show and Tell, to read books they had chosen from the collection, and to participate in the activities.

6.3 Challenges and cultural issues

Creating and maintaining a volunteer support group for international families has several large challenges. First and foremost is the fact that international families are by nature busy, have tight schedules and budgets, and often move (are transferred or return to their home country for visits or permanently), and sometimes the Japanese spouse is not eager to participate in the group.

The following were key aspects for maintaining a viable program. Yet, for each, clear challenges always existed.

- Flexibility
 - Not having too strict of an attendance policy helped as there were often times when families simply could not attend. Yet, the lack of consistency of attendance sometimes resulted in the program not being successfully done.
- Distribution of leadership responsibilities (Contact person, treasurer, secretary, programs, educational resources, etc.)
 - Sharing responsibility is important for a volunteer group, yet having families who were in the group long enough to feel confident in a leadership role posed problems.
- Convenience of location (centralized, low cost)
 - Finding a place to meet and house the books that did not cost much was a problem from the very beginning.
- PR (through international association or city/prefectural newsletters and websites, bilingual education newsletters, bilingual education email lists, religious centers, etc.)
 - Finding time to contact these groups was a challenge and convincing them that it was strictly not-for-profit also was sometimes difficult as the field of language education is often seen as a profit making business.
- Clear educational goals and policies
 - As the membership fluctuated year-round and the majority of the participants were 3-4 years old, it was difficult to set clear goals.

When I first became involved with international families in my region over ten years ago, most groups were like 'playgroups'. They had gatherings, parties, picnics etc. that gave families opportunities to interact. Yet, leadership seemed to be in on a precipice, ready to fall and crumble at any time, and, unfortunately, it often did. I assessed that international parents would not commit time and energy into participating consistently and enthusiastically in such a group unless they could receive something immediate and absolutely necessary to their life then and there. A needs analysis questionnaire showed that all the families felt their children should become not only proficient in spoken English, but would like their children to develop a high enough proficiency to be able to be educated in English. Actually, it would be difficult to find a family who did not proclaim their aspirations for their children succeed in academic English. Yet, they do not know how to go about it nor have

proper, easily and reasonably accessible resources. This is why I felt that a proper literacy center with an after school or Saturday program, like those which support low-income immigrants in the US would fit the needs of the families. But, the challenges as stated above have created difficulties from the start. Fortunately, as the group's goals are educationally based, participation remained consistent enough for the group to continue.

7 Program 2: Japanese Families Groups (English as a foreign language)

7.1 Procedures

In the recruitment of participants in this pilot program, mothers who were interested in having their children learn English as a foreign language and who were willing to attend weekly training sessions and follow up in the home were the target group. Mothers who responded to ads for the new program or word-of-mouth information attended a one-hour explanation session where they learned about the educational philosophy of the program (shared reading and family literacy), were introduced to the library (lending and educational/resource materials) and went over the sample curriculum and learning diary that they would be responsible for at home. These groups met from April 2006 to October 2007.

Two groups were formed: one for families with children aged 3-5 (preschool aged children), and another for children aged 6-8 (1st-3rd grade elementary). The multi-age policy was adopted based on early childhood development theories and proved to be appropriate for this program. The interests and linguistic abilities were similar enough so the groups could form a cohesive program.

In the hour long weekly sessions, the teacher introduced the materials and focused alternately on mothers' ability to produce the language and having the children practice. Then, various activities were done to reinforce the language. Special attention was given so that the mothers could easily replicate them at home and practice the language on a daily basis. In addition, homework was assigned so the children could show what they accomplished and receives stickers in their learning diary for their work.

Goals

- To introduce English as a foreign language to kindergarten and lower elementary aged children.
- To help mothers/grandmothers practice English at home with their children/grandchildren.
- To foster a love for reading and sharing information (cultural and content).

Sample weekly program

- **Learning diary and book return/check out**
 - Children and their parents choose up to three new books to check out for the week.
 - Children return and check out the books.
 - Children show their learning diary and homework to the teacher and get a sticker.
- **Hello Song**
 - Sing a welcome song to gather everyone together.
- **Shared reading**
 - Teacher reads a picture book based on a theme, season or holiday.

- Teacher talks about the significance of the content and answers questions from the families.

- **Book of the Month**

- Every family had the same sets of books with CDs. These books were carefully chosen as ones that were designed for EFL and also had Japanese guidebooks and CDs to help the parents: *Potato Pals* (Jackson & Kimura, 2004); *Shared Reading Mice Packs* (King, 2006).
- Reading, follow-up activities, and homework assigned.

- **Songs and finger plays**

- Every family had the same CD and book set. These songs are popular ones for American children and have instructions in English for the movements: *Wee Sing Children's Songs and Fingerplays* (Price Stern Sloan, 2005).

- **Picture dictionary**

- Thematic units that include listening, a short dialog and a song or chant were practiced: *Longman Young Children's Picture Dictionary* (Graham & Jamieson, 2007). A Japanese word list was also used.

7.2 Benefits

This style parental training program provides a clear alternative to typical English conversation school programs where children attend once a week in order to practice oral English. In these programs, often there is little in terms of at home practice of the weekly lesson. So, teachers are faced with the issue of attrition of knowledge and having to focus much time and energy on review parts of lessons that were quickly forgotten by the children. Parents could enjoy time with their children during the sessions and at home. This seemed particularly important for the group that met later in the evening and consisted primarily of working mothers.

Nine out of the ten participating families answered a questionnaire at the end of the program. Some of the main categories and comments are as follows:

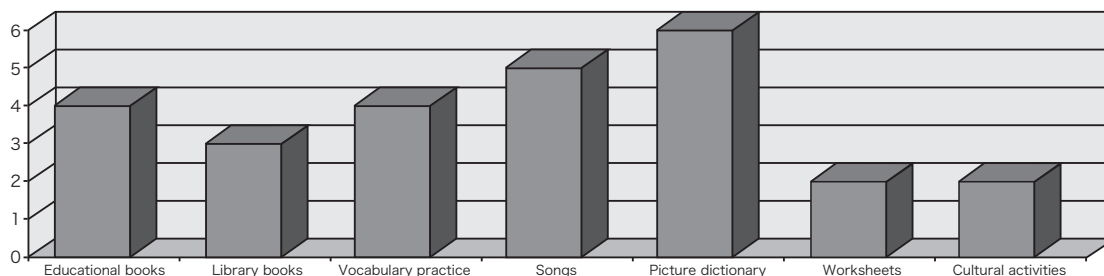
- **Parent/child learning**

- Some parents commented positively about being a partner in learning English with their child. They are able to look up words together and practice the songs, books and picture dictionary words together. This parent-child learner partnership provided a nice atmosphere for communication at home.

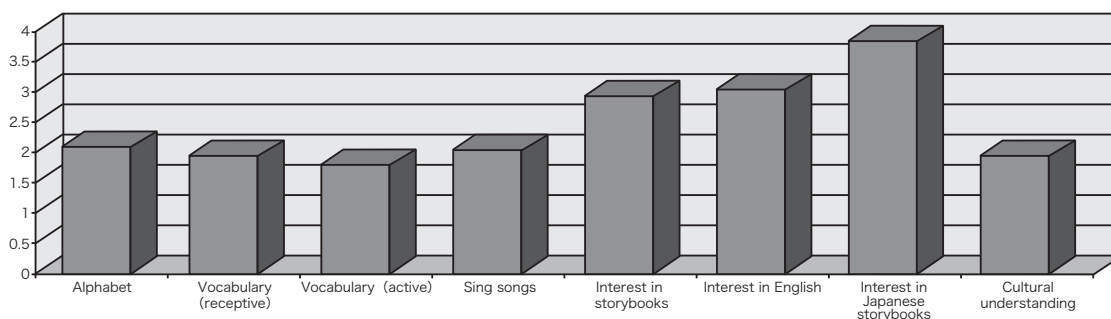
- **How their children feel towards reading in English as a result of the program.**

- Four out of six said that their interest increased. Several commented that their child's interest in having books read repetitively has also increased.
- One parent noted that her ability to read in English increased a lot and that she felt confident in reading to her child. Some children became curious about English and other cultures and started asking their mom's questions like, "How do you say --- in English?". They began to see their parent as a source of English knowledge.

- **Best activities in the program (Number of responses that ranked this category in the top three most important parts of the program).**



- #1 Picture Dictionary (6): They noted that it was very clear and easy to follow up with at home.
- #2 Songs (5): They noted that their children reacted well to learning with rhythm.
- #3 Books (4) and vocabulary practice (4): One commented that their child was little by little gaining progress in reading the books.
- Reading the library books (3) and cultural information (2) both ranked low. Although one parent commented that the library books provided a great way to learn new vocabulary, another noted that it is very difficult to understand these books and the children lose interest quickly.
- Analysis: Although the goal of the program is to learn English through stories and books, in order to get to the level required for reading stories, basic vocabulary knowledge and the rhythm of English must be learned. Materials for these skills were also the easiest for children and parents to engage in at home. Book reading is much more involved and only the simplest of books should be used in the beginning stage of this program.
- Skills and interests that most improved as a result of the program (Average ranking: Parents' ranked their children's improvement in each area on a scale from 1: not at all to 5: a lot).



- #1 Interest in Japanese storybooks (3.8): Parents noted in the questionnaire and commented that their children's interest in picture books in general increased significantly while participating in this project. This phenomenon might be attributed to the age of the participants as a natural part of their development. However, it could be determined that the increased time that the parents spent reading books and doing activities in English had a positive correlation to the child's desire and enjoyment of reading books in their native language.
- #2 Interest in English (3.0): For most children, it took about a year in the program to demonstrate active

- interest in learning English. Parents' judged their children's interest based on several criteria: 1. Their children initiated speech in English, either with a parent on by themselves (One mother commented that she would overhear her son singing and using puppets to 'speak' in English while she was preparing dinner.); 2. Their children asked how to say words or phrases in English; or 3. They told other friends or family members about what they were doing, for instance, by showing books or singing songs. Parents commented that their children were most interested in songs, interactive games and simple picture books.
- #3 Interest in storybooks (2.9): For some children, they began to show an interest after a year of involvement. Then, they would request that their favorite books be read repetitively. Also, one parent commented that their children got frustrated when they could not understand a more advanced picture book that they chose from the library.
- The three areas of language improvement all ranked around 2. Parents commented that their children were learning little by little and could remember words they were interested in (ones from their daily lives). Also, they enjoyed playing alphabet and vocabulary games, so the parents could observe their gradually increasing knowledge. Some children were still too shy to speak out with confidence.
- Analysis: At such a young age, it is important to be exposed to a lot of variety in language and have a lot of interaction with family and peers. This program demonstrated that children can achieve both through a family-based shared reading program. The children and parents took about a year to really gain confidence and show outward interest, but once they had established this base, they asked questions readily and became increasingly active. This seems to match the natural process of learning one's native language whereby a period of rich input and gradual production and understanding is necessary. It is notable that parents can observe even the slightest of improvement. Their level of satisfaction in the program was very high as they could understand the complexity of learning a foreign language. Their expectations of immediate production were lowered and fears that involvement in such a program was not a practical usage of their time were quelled.

7.3 Challenges and cultural issues

Parents often expect that a teacher will teach their child the language and about culture without direct parental involvement. It is very unusual in Japanese society for a parent to play the role of the 'expert' teacher by following up by engaging in learning activities at home. It takes time to build their confidence level so they are secure in showing their children that they are learning side by side with them. And, encouraging the parents to build their English skills to a level where they can read books or sing songs confidently with their children is quite difficult. Murphey and Asaoka (2004) encourage teachers who are not proficient at English, yet are given the task of teaching, to adopt the role of 'near peer role models' where they are learning with their students. The parents in this program gradually adjusted to this role, but it took considerable time. As the advisor, I did not interact with the parents every week, but had enough contact with the parents to notice that it took roughly one year to adjust to the role of co-learner with their children. In the beginning, parents often seemed resistant to speak in English in front of their children, shy about participating in activities and lacking confidence to initiate dialog in English. This gradually changed and parents became more and more open and active.

Also, parents are busy with other responsibilities and cannot attend, say, when a sibling is ill or they need to

care for their own parent. This inhibits continuity in the program. As the advisor, I encouraged the families to continue and to recruit another family member such as a grandparent to attend when they could not. For families with such support, this worked out, but for others, they needed to be absent and their child would become upset about missing a session. At times, children did attend without their parent, but this only worked for those who had been involved long enough to feel comfortable being apart from their parent. On the other hand, for one mother with twins, she had difficulty participating in the sessions because one often would try to get her attention or sit on her lap or climb up her back during the session. She found it distracting and wondered if the children would not be better off attending lessons without her there.

8 Program 3: Preschool Program (English as a foreign language)

8.1 Procedures

The preschool program differs from the other two in that the training of English language supports was for the preschool teachers rather than the parents, although parents were invited to attend the monthly sessions. However, as the teachers interacted with the children on an everyday basis, they could be just as successful as caregivers at home in incorporating the English program into the everyday activities for the children. Each teacher was given a set of books with teachers' guides for photocopiable activities, CDs and vocabulary cards for that year's program. They were given a copy of the monthly program at the end of each session and followed-up by reading/playing the CD for the story at lunchtime or during the day and singing songs.

The instructor visited the school once a month and conducted a 45-minute program (which often lasted up to one-hour) from March 2006 to October 2007. All the members of the school attended: Children from infancy to five years old, teachers, principal, nutritionists, and sometimes parents of children in the school or from the parent-child center (*kosodate-shien*). In addition to these sessions, when possible, the instructor also participated in preschool events like the spring play (*oyuugikai*) and sports festivals (*undoukai* and *taikusai*). The whole school would make a circle and dance and sing the theme song for the program (*Books are Fun*, by the famous American educational character, Barney, 1999). At the spring play, even the parents became involved at acted out the beloved *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* (Martin & Carle, 1996).

Goals

- To introduce English as a foreign language to all the members of the preschool.
- To help teachers practice English in the classroom with the children.
- To foster a love for reading and sharing information (cultural and content).

Sample monthly program

● Warm-up song and Theme song

- Songs such as *The Hello Song* or *What's Your Name?* as a warm-up.
- Theme song, such as *Books are Fun* (Barney, 1999).

● Review

- Read the book, sing the songs and practice vocabulary from the previous month.

● **Book of the month: Shared reading, song and language practice**

- One big book from the series Shared Reading Mice Packs (King, 2006) or a book from the Potato Pals 1,2 (Jackson & Kimura, 2005).
- Song that accompanied the theme of the book.
- Vocabulary flash cards for that book.

● **Music for movement and fingerplays**

- Various thematic songs for small children, such as The Counting Song, Hickory, Dickory, Dock, What Time is it Mr. Wolff? or The Eency Weency Spider..

● **Ending**

- Review of what children and teachers should practice that month.
- Good-bye Song.

8.2 Benefits

Nation-wide, more and more preschools are seeking English teachers who can come to their preschool to teach once a week. Some principals are genuinely interested in the educational aspects of such a program, yet others are more influenced by the need to recruit students and understand how attractive such a program seems to parents. Yet, many schools lack the funds to outsource such a program and create contracts with local language schools. Such a monthly program could be a viable way to ease the burden.

The primary benefit that I observed was the genuine camaraderie of the teachers and children and how they all participated in the program enthusiastically. They truly enjoyed each session and collaborated together in each part of the session. The teachers took on a dual role, one of participant/learner and acted like the children, and one of teacher/disciplinarian and helped guide the children in the activities and intervened when children misbehaved. Especially in the review section, you could see how proud the teachers and children were to show their English teacher how well they could sing the songs or read the book that they had worked on in the previous month. The children were also excited to show their parents what they could do in English at the special events such as the *oyuugikai*. And, seeing their moms on stage acting out a play in English must have brought to life the world of English and storybooks and demonstrated that all of their family could enjoy it.

In the questionnaire sent out to the principal, preschool teachers and English instructor, they all had very positive comments and responses. The English instructor pointed out that the program fostered active participation and allowed for enough short, interesting activities to maintain the attention of the children who often have very short attention spans. The combination of stories, songs and movement along with vocabulary and phrase practice worked quite well. Although the children were shy and reserved at the beginning of the program, they gradually got used to it and their active participation and attention span increased over time. The principal and the teachers agreed that the stories and songs were the strong points of the program. They are easy to practice during the interim days and catch the attention of the children easily.

8.3 Cultural issues/challenges

Despite the demand for such English programs, there is a serious deficit in the number of qualified instructors to teach such a program. It takes a very specific person to teach: someone who has lots of experience working

with 0-5 year old children; is bilingual; is talented at singing, dancing and storytelling; is knowledgeable about the latest English language teaching materials; is willing to travel to schools and spend a considerable amount of time and energy teaching such a program. In my experience, it is extremely difficult to find such a person. The instructor for this program had been teaching at preschools and kindergartens in the region for over twenty years and despite her busy schedule was able to come once a month to teach. In addition, support and cooperation from the school's principal is essential in establishing such a program. Many schools are convinced that once a week classes with small numbers of students is the ideal way to teach small children a foreign language. Also, they do not want to burden their already overworked teachers with the additional responsibility of incorporating English into their daily routine. In this program, the principal was very open to a new format and cooperated in choosing and ordering materials for each classroom and for the English teacher, set up files for each teacher and introduced the program enthusiastically at the PTA meeting, staff meetings and at events. Her positive attitude exuded confidence in the staff that this is a good way to proceed. The feeling of the program being a fun part of the children's activities seemed to overrule any feelings of it being a burden.

9 Discussion

The field of English education, especially for young learners, is changing at such a rapid pace that careful consideration and studies based on the practices overseas and cultural considerations for practices appropriate for Japan are necessary. These three pilot studies demonstrate the benefits of applying shared reading and parental/homeroom teacher involvement in the learning process with small children. In each program, there was a slow adjustment and learning curve on the part of the caregiver to gain confidence in this role, often taking about a year to really feel comfortable and work with the children successfully. The Japanese culture, however, does not view such a painstakingly slow process in a positive light. Although the results are very positive, is doubtful that such an approach to foreign language education for young learners could be easily adopted on a nation-wide scale. This dilemma is not unique, however, to Japan. Every study mentioned in the literature review expels the challenges of involving parents, but encourages educators not to give up easily as this is often the key to children's academic success.

In the two programs for families, international and Japanese, all the parents highlighted the benefit of enjoying the program with their children and spending quality time during the interim period reading books, singing songs and doing crafts/worksheets. In an era where children often watch TV or play video games by themselves and are busy in after-school extracurricular activities and studies, this provides an opportunity for essential parent-child communication. Parents said their children looked forward to going together to the session. It was a fun family activity to do together.

In addition, this increased communication and the practice of parent-child as learners in partnership may also prove to have a positive influence on other academic areas such as Japanese literacy skills as well. It is notable that the parents commented that their children's interest in Japanese storybooks increased in correlation to their experience reading books in English with their mother/grandmother. Thus focusing on one academic skill may have a spillover effect on other aspects of the child's overall academic success.

In regards to the cultural adaptability of this style of EFL program and the ability for existing EFL programs

or those in the planning stage to adopt such family-based practices, it is doubtful that most programs could readily do so. Overcoming the barriers of parents not being able to attend do to other responsibilities such as the care of a sibling or elderly parent or not being willing to as they see the role of the language institution of one that should interact directly with their child/ren may not be in the interest of the management of the institution or school. On the other hand, being a culture that is directed by fads and trends, language institutions may benefit from being able to distinguish itself from others through a unique program. Even if caretakers are not involved in each lesson, they can strive to incorporate materials that children can easily use at home, such as the storybook packs and songbooks with CDs and explanations in Japanese. Instructors can give homework that requires parents to supervise children's practice of English at home. As the results of the parents' survey show, most parents are willing to work with their children once or twice a week to follow up on lessons.

As for the preschool program, it demonstrated the benefits of involving all of the school in the program in that teachers could easily feel comfortable enough with the material to follow up with the children in class. The main difficulties, though, lie with the multi-age philosophy. As the teachers commented that it is difficult for the younger children to follow the program, dividing the age groups in two, perhaps 0-2 and 3-5, may be a better strategy. Yet, it would be very difficult to design a program for 0-2 year olds and achieve a high enough level of energy during the session for the instructor to keep up a strong rhythm and momentum. Although the small children are more or less passive observers, by being exposed to the older children's active participation, I believe they are experiencing quality interaction in English which will provide a solid base for themselves when they are old enough to participate actively themselves.

10 Conclusion

Overall, the programs proved successful and positive experience for the participants. The shift of the parent/caretaker-child dynamics from that of the standard hierarchical one to that of cooperative co-learners seemed to provide a refreshing change for the families. Of course, the children still naturally saw their parent in the role of informant. It must be quite a confidence booster for parents to have their children questions about English! It is my hopes that this model will become known in the EFL circles of Japan and influence policy and programming in a positive way.

At the time that this paper was written, the first phase in this longitudinal study was completed and the second phase just beginning. The second phase involved moving the library to a local international school in October 2007 which is run by the Multilingual Education Research Institute NPO. This shift will provide the forum from which to reach out to other institutes nation-wide. From this phase, I plan to continue the longitudinal study and develop specific training programs for parents, either in the form of short-term training sessions, instructional DVDs or Internet-based support. In addition, a follow-up study on this initial stage should be undertaken to continue the inquiry into the possible formats for family supported shared reading programs in Japan.

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An Analysis of Three Pilot Shared Reading Programs

[要旨]

日本において早期英語教育への関心はますます高まりつつある。このことは、子ども向け英語教室の増加、イマージョンプリスクールの設立、または小学校での国際理解教育としての英語活動の導入などに示される。児童英語指導のアプローチは海外でよく取り入れられ、研究されているヒューマニスティックアプローチやシュタイナー氏とウォールドーフ氏によるホールランゲージ等に習う傾向がある。近年、子どもの教育の質を高め、それをサポートするためには家庭の協力を得ることがが教養力のある子どもを育てるのに最も有効であることが注目されている。本研究は、本研究者が日本で実施した3つのパイロットプログラムについてまとめたものである。まず3つのプログラムの概要を説明し、外国で実践されていることが日本で文化的に適応できるかどうかを分析した。さらに、各プログラムの長所と短所について考察した。

〔キーワード〕 第二言語習得、教授方法、早期英語教育、家庭教育、プレリテラシー、シェアードリーディング、バイリンガル教育