



Teaching about Children Around the World

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Language learning in England and Japan

This article is about a set of global education resources on the theme of “children around the world” which I developed for teaching French and German in a comprehensive secondary school (ages 11-16) in England in 2007/08. These aimed to increase students’ empathy and connectivity while increasing their motivation, overall learning and awareness of global issues. This article will look at how the resources were created, and how similar ideas could be used in classrooms in Japan.

Both England and Japan have been criticised for the quality of their *Modern Foreign Languages* (MFL) curricula. In 2006, the UK *Department for Education and Skills* (DfES) published the findings of a national report by Lord Dearing called the *Languages Review Consultation Report*, commissioned to investigate how to reverse the decline of language learning in England. Lord Dearing’s conclusions were damning, cutting to the very foundations of MFL in English schools.

The Review found the curriculum to be too slow, lacking in age appropriateness, in relation to real life, in cognitive challenge for higher achievers and without any draw for less-motivated learners. It recommended that to “improve the experience of learning a language for pupils, to increase the motivation to learn, and to enhance pedagogy”, schools should seek “to recognise and celebrate achievement in small steps and engaging content (including links with the real world in which the language is spoken)” (DfES, 2006, p.11).

In common with England, Japan’s foreign language curricula (mainly English) have been “routinely criticized since the turn of the [19th/20th] century” (Kikuchi and Browne, 2009, p.173). One main problem has been an overly heavy reliance on the traditional *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) methodology (Lamie, 1998), which was developed during the Meiji era when Japan was seeking to modernise and absorb information from other countries (Rohlen, 1983). Japan is now in a very different situation. The Ministry of Education (MEXT) recognized in the 1980s that Japanese need to be able to better communicate and interact with the rest of the world (Lockley, in press).

This realisation has found its expression in two major changes to Japan’s *Course of Study Guidelines* over the last 20 years, one in 1989 and one in 2003, which resulted in concrete measures and a substantial budget to support its aims.

These positive changes are in contrast to England where many feel that the government has been making retrogressive moves in the language learning sphere. MFL is now only compulsory until age 14, though it did become statutory in primary schools this year.

Aspinall (2006, p.257) writes that “among the vast majority of academics, policy-makers, teachers, parents and business groups [in Japan], it is hard to find anything other than wholehearted approval of efforts to improve international education in general and English language education in particular”. This is diametrically opposite to England, where if a student wants to pursue an academic route at school, MFL are seen as irrelevant with little application outside the classroom. This is due to the pervasiveness of English as the ‘international language’ and to the lack of motivation for school language learning.

Schools in both countries are free to choose their own textbooks from those approved or to create their own curricula within government guidelines. In England, my students of French and German considered these textbooks childish, boring, uninspiring and disconnected from their daily lives. Japan also experiences difficulties with uninspiring texts which traditionally concentrated on *yakudoku* (Sato and Kleinsasser, 2004).

How were these resources developed?

The MFL resources I designed about “children around the world” were inspired by two initiatives: the work of the *Leeds Development Education Centre* (an educational charity promoting global citizenship) and the storyline approach to language teaching (in which stories rather than unconnected topics form the basis of curricula).

Aimed at 11-14 year old learners, they involve stories (in French or German) about issues in the everyday lives of children in various countries around the world. The focus is one that the (young English) reader can relate to, but often contrasts with their own life experience. They ensure that students can use, expand on and re-enforce the vocabulary that the normal curriculum demands.

The characters are made more ‘real’ in that photos are used and maps are provided to detail where they live. Colourful, culturally interesting photos expand on and support the text to make comprehension easier. Where possible, age appropriate cultural insights are included, like the

eating of guinea pig for Christmas in South America; these stories prove particularly popular among students. The focus sometimes falls upon socio-economic issues, such as a lack of access to education, child labour or poverty.

Each story continues over the course of several lessons and is linked to a chapter from a conventional textbook. The chapter on house and home changes its focus to talk about poor housing, child labour and lack of material possessions in Paraguay; the chapter on animals and the family becomes the story of a girl called Isabella living on a farm in Chile; food connects to Japan and Nigeria; transport connects to China and India; and the learning of body parts connects to the civil war in Sierra Leone where thousands of victims had limbs cut off by rebel militia in the 1990's.


The subjects connect with other curriculum areas, such as geography, citizenship (similar to social studies in Japan) or maths, showing that languages have applications outside the classroom. The exercises include elements of reading comprehension. Extension work often comprises a 'find the.... in the text exercise' which picks out grammar, conjugation of verbs and parts of speech. As far as possible, the resources cater to different learning styles, promote thinking skills and allow students to self-differentiate. Some questions ask students to draw pictures or diagrams illustrating what they have read; others allow students to choose their own activities based on the text. Finally, for high achievers or quick workers there is a translation challenge which they can complete.

The new words introduced use cognates and are calculated not to appear overly onerous. The vocabulary level therefore appears to be higher and more sophisticated than words students are used to studying. Most of the new words are in a glossary, but not all; if necessary, students use a dictionary. At all stages, students are encouraged to work things out for themselves or ask other students, thereby increasing autonomy, teamwork, motivation and confidence in the language.

How did learning about the world's children in a foreign language affect English children?

From the evidence of classroom surveys and mark book grades, the appeal and success of these resources was evident. Students taking part in these lessons performed consistently well in tests, often the majority of the class obtaining the higher levels attainable at their stage. The other teachers and I found that these classes demonstrated better motivation and an improved atmosphere. The most popular aspects were the storylines and their challenging nature (e.g. remembering previous vocabulary, finding new words,

and working out the conjugation of a verb to answer a question correctly). Students also showed a marked improvement in verb conjugation and vocabulary retention as the resources were designed to utilise words learnt in previous months and years as well as the target vocabulary for each textbook chapter.

Learning French and German through Studying about "Children Around the World"		
		
CHILD	COUNTRY	ISSUE
1 Isabella	Chile	families, animals
2 Shalini	India	cultural differences
3 Shivute	Namibia	school, clothing
4 Juan	Paraguay	child labour
5 Yu Lan	China	property, old age
6 Moussa	Senegal	school, clothing
7 Wole	Nigeria/France	food, immigration
8 -	Sierra Leone	child soldiers
9 Hendrika	Namibia	races in Africa
10 Jose	Mexico	income differences
11 Lucille	Canada	sports, diversity
12 Miyuki	Japan	food, school

The highest and lowest achievers displayed significant improvements in motivation by using these resources. The higher achievers found more difficult activities (e.g. translation) very satisfying. Lower achievers liked being able to choose the level and type of exercise they wanted to carry out.

The resources were not universally popular. Initially almost all students were very interested, but some lost interest after two or more stories, what might be termed 'poverty fatigue'. This manifested itself in comments like "not another one" and "I don't want to learn about poor people anymore", even though the resources do not universally concentrate on undeveloped countries.

Despite this minority of negative responses, the global issues aspects of the resources generally proved the most popular. Students felt that to learn about the world in a foreign language lesson was appropriate and the fact that they were studying German or French didn't necessarily mean they had to study about a German- or French-speaking country. The issues raised gave food for thought, which was dealt with at the end of the lesson (in English – most students' first language), where students shared their reactions to and opinions of the topics covered. They often made connections with what they had studied in other subject areas.

The Situation in Japan

In Japan, there are already several global issues texts available including “*Global Issues*” by Tim Grose and “*You, Me and the World: A Course in English for Global Citizenship*” by David Peaty. These cover a wide range of issues but are generally aimed at older, more proficient students.

If global education teaching resources like the ones described here were developed, then similar issues could be covered for younger age groups. They are directly relevant to the current MEXT course of study guidelines for English in junior high schools, in particular “understanding the ways of life and cultures of Japan and the rest of the world” (MEXT, 2003, p.7) and encouraging students to have “a positive attitude toward understanding and using a foreign language on their own” (MEXT, 2003, p.7). The self differentiation reduces the need for whole class teacher instruction, leaving more time to support struggling students, and allow faster learners to progress without waiting for slower classmates.

In conversation with colleagues, I have often found a common perception in Japan (and to a certain extent in the UK) that changing traditional curricula and ways of teaching requires lots of energy and classroom input from the teacher. I contest this and suggest that it is often younger teachers who are keenest to introduce new methods and therefore more experienced members of staff make the connection that new equals energy and activity from the teacher.

I believe there is a strong need for students to be motivated, willing to use their intelligence and initiative autonomously, and for the foreign language studied to “give sufficient consideration to actual language-use situations” (MEXT, 2003, p.7). This requires better resources, not more energy. These types of global education resources could easily be fitted into existing Japanese teaching practices by teachers without classroom presence and practice needing to change radically.

Conclusion

These classroom materials that I designed on the world’s children and global issue themes made the job of teaching compulsory languages (French and German) to often unwilling English school students more interesting, more fulfilling and much simpler. The lessons became more involved, autonomous and compelling for most students and the evidence points to improved attainment levels. As students were more motivated and involved in the learning, less time and energy had to be given to behaviour management, thereby allowing the teacher more time to work with individual students.

Given Dearing’s findings in *The Languages Review Consultation Report* and the attempts by MEXT to improve English teaching in Japan, this global education approach to language teaching could prove crucial to the future of MFL in both countries. At least, it deserves deeper scrutiny as a possible way to revive the fortunes of language education in both English and Japanese schools.

This article was published in slightly different form in the JALT Materials Writers SIG newsletter ‘Between the Keys’ and the JALT 2010 Osaka Pan SIG Conference Proceedings. It incorporates parts of ‘See change in Japanese senior high school English lessons’ (in press) by the author.

The worksheets are still in use at the school where they were developed and have been downloaded thousands of times. If you’d like to view, use or translate them for use in your classes, they’re available at: <www.tes.co.uk/resourcehub.aspx?navcode=70>. Just type the words “global schools interactive” (by *tottoritom*) into the search box, then register and download. I would be grateful to receive copies of any translations that you make.

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