An Ethnographic Study of Learners’ Participation
in English Lessons at a Japanese Elementary School
An Ethnographic Study of Learners' Participation in English Lessons at a Japanese Elementary School

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate Course at
Hyogo University of Teacher Education

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of School Education

by
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December 2004
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to all those who made it possible for me to complete this thesis.

First and foremost, I would like to express cordial gratitude to Associate professor, Tatsuhiro Yoshida, my seminar supervisor, for giving me permission to commence this thesis in the first place. I am deeply indebted to his invaluable spiritual and academic advice. His stimulating suggestions and encouragement helped me throughout the research and writing of this thesis. Without his constant and generous support, this thesis could not have been completed.

I would also like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my chief supervisor, Professor Toshihiko Yamaoka, who gave me valuable comments and warm encouragement.

I have furthermore to thank Mr. Yoshinori Onishi, Ms. Chiemi Tomofuji, and the sixth graders of Shimotojo Elementary School, for giving me permission to observe the classes for a half year. I also want to thank the principal of Shimotojo Elementary School, Ms. Hidemi Yamamoto and all the staff of the school. Without their assistance, I could not have carried out this project.

I am also grateful to the rest of the teaching staff of the Department of English Language at Hyogo University of Teacher Education who provided me with invaluable and specialized advice.

My colleagues and seniors from the Department of English Language supported me in my research work. I want to thank them for all
their help and support. Especially I am obliged to my seminar members, Ms. Yuki Imamura, Mr. Sadaaki Togawa, Mr. Hidemoto Murofushi, Ms. Keiko Yasukawa, Ms. Mayumi Matoba, Mr. Mark Taylor and Mr. Zeng Gang. All of them supported and encouraged me to go ahead with my thesis.

Last, but not least, I would like to express my deep appreciation to my father, mother and sister, who supported and encouraged me throughout these past two years.

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Yashiro, Hyogo
December 2004
Abstract

This paper focuses on the learners' participation in English lessons at a Japanese elementary school. In English language education at elementary school, introduced after the revision of the Course of Study in 2002, the teachers must devise both contents and activities. The introduction of English lessons in most of the elementary schools is still in its initial stage (Matsukawa, 2003). What happens in the elementary classrooms under these circumstances? How do the teachers in elementary schools manage the English lessons? How do the elementary school students learn English as a foreign language in the English Activity lessons? In an attempt to answer these questions about English Activity lessons at the elementary school level, we observed the English lessons in a public elementary school from April to July in 2004.

When we started the observation in April, the sixth grade students, who had just passed from the fifth grade to the sixth, seemed relatively quiet during the English lesson. However, the students seemed to change gradually over the study period, not individually but as a whole class or as activity groups. The homeroom teacher noted to us, "as the class was reorganized into sixth graders, the power of a class community (gakkyu no chikara) has been reduced by half. We should start the English Activity lessons over from the beginning." It was difficult for us to believe that the sixth grade students' English skills had not developed but regressed. This HRT's assertion about the "gakkyu no chikara" or the power of a class community raised questions about our perceptions of the English language
classroom. Therefore, in this report, we will focus on groups doing the English lessons in order to analyze the classroom practices, and, more specifically, the framework of accessibilities of resources (Toohey, 2000; Toohey and Day, 1999).

Chapter 1 focuses on the latest trends in foreign language education at the Japanese elementary school level. According to a survey reported by the MEXT in June 2004, 88.3% of the elementary schools in Japan introduced English Activity lessons in the 2003-04 school year mostly during the Period of Integrated Study (PIS).

In chapter 2, to clarify the theoretical framework of the present study, we briefly review previous studies that investigated classroom interactions from sociocultural points of view (Toohey, 1998; Toohey and Day, 1999; Toohey, Waterstone and Jule·Lemke, 2000; Toohey, 2000). Toohey (2000) reported a longitudinal ethnography of a group of children learning English as a second language in a Canadian school from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of Grade 2. In Toohey and Day (1999), they examined how ESL learners participated in the mainstream classroom by investigating the learners’ access to community resources.

Chapter 3 presents our research on the English Activity lessons in an elementary school. The English Activity lessons in a public elementary school, Shimotojo elementary school in Ono city, Hyogo prefecture, started three years ago as a part of the PIS. The participants were sixth grade students, the homeroom teacher, and the Japanese teacher of English. We videotaped the 45 minutes lessons for 14 weeks. In addition, we interviewed the two teachers in order to deepen our understanding of the classroom
In the analyses of classroom conversation, several observations presented in this chapter show in what situations the students' access to the resources is facilitated, and under what situations this access is blocked. We present four cases extracted from the classroom events. Three of them are examined by referring to the three notions of learning: interactional symmetry, playfulness, and learning identity, which appeared to allow access to the resources. A symmetrical interaction implies equality in talk between the teachers and the students. The teachers during the lessons neither dominated nor controlled the classroom discourse too much. They often provided opportunities for the students to express their ideas as well as listened to what the learners said. A very casual style of conversation between the teachers and the students gave enjoyment of talking with each other. Also, playful interactions, as some ELT researchers mention, are a very important part of language learning in the elementary school context, because they are connected to the daily conversational situation, which allows the students to operate using the target language in a very meaningful way. Another important finding was that the students found their own learning identities in English lessons. We assume that each individual student can possess his or her own learning identity in various learning opportunities within their school life, and a relatively novel type of learning identity is found in the English lessons. A rich variety of activities and several of the group activities cultivate students' learning identities positively. Contrary to these three, when the discourse structure was fixed as it is in the IRF sequences, the students could not interact symmetrically, and
thus the students' access to the resources appeared to be blocked.

Finally, we conclude with some discussion about English Activity lessons at the elementary school level based on our research findings and conclude the paper by once again considering the HRT's remark on "the power of a class community," which seems to imply the connectedness or the bond among the participants in the classroom.
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Introduction

The main purpose of the present study is to analyze the students' participation in English lessons in an elementary school. English language education was introduced as a part of a Period of Integrated Study (PIS, hereafter) after the revision of the Course of Study in 2002. The practical handbook for elementary school English activities issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports Science and Technology (MEXT, hereafter), which proposes aims and ideas for English lessons, states that the aims of the lessons are to have students get used to and enjoy learning a foreign language. Besides, it states the contents of the lessons are not fixed, so the teachers must devise both contents and activities. The introduction of English lessons in most of the elementary schools is still in its initial stage (Matsukawa, 2003). What happens in the elementary classrooms under these circumstances? How do the teachers in elementary schools manage the English lessons? How do the elementary school students learn English as a foreign language in the English Activity lessons? In an attempt to answer these questions about English Activity lessons at the elementary school level, we observed the English lessons in a public elementary school from April to July in 2004.

When we started the observation in April, the sixth grade students, who had just passed from the fifth grade to the sixth, seemed relatively quiet during the English lesson. However, the students seemed to change gradually over the study period, not individually but as a whole class or as activity groups. The homeroom teacher (HRT) noted to us, “as the class was
reorganized into sixth graders, the power of a class community\textsuperscript{1} (\textit{gakkyu no chikara}) has been reduced by half. We should start the English Activity lessons over from the beginning.” It is natural to assume that English skills would not decrease because of a class organization change. Moreover, the students took the same English lessons, which had been planned by the Japanese English teacher and the HRT when the students were in the fifth grade the previous year. Thus, it was difficult for us to believe that the sixth grade students’ English skills had not developed but regressed. This HRT’s assertion about the “\textit{gakkyu no chikara}” or the power of a class community raised questions about our perceptions of the English language classroom. Therefore, in this study, we will focus on groups doing the English lessons in order to analyze the classroom practices, and, more specifically, the framework of accessibilities of resources (Toohey, 2000; Toohey and Day, 1999).

Chapter 1 introduces the latest trends in foreign language education at the Japanese elementary school level. English conversation lessons at the elementary school level began as one of the options in the PIS after the revision of the Course of Study in 2002. Because each school can decide what issues to be treated in the PIS, including environmental studies, area studies, information technology and international understanding, a common curriculum for the PIS is not provided by the MEXT. Thus, the teachers themselves develop and plan contents and activities.

\textsuperscript{1} The author admits the term “the power of class community”, which is a literal translation of the original words “\textit{gakkyu no chikara}”, sounds very awkward in English. However, it was difficult to translate the term, which contains various aspects of learning in this classroom. Through the analysis of the communicative events in the classroom attempts will be made to work out the meaning of the term.
In chapter 2, previous studies done by Toohey and others (Toohey, 2000; Toohey and Day, 1999), who conducted a four-year ethnographic study in a Canadian school, are discussed. They criticized the traditional second language acquisition research or the research in applied linguistics and presented more holistic views toward language learning based on sociocultural perspectives and the community of practice. In Toohey and Day (1999), they examined how ESL learners participated in the mainstream classroom by investigating the learners' access to community resources.

In chapter 3, we report our research on the English Activity lessons in an elementary school. The English Activity lessons in a public elementary school, Shimotojo elementary school in Ono city, Hyogo prefecture, started three years ago as a part of the PIS. The participants in this research were sixth grade students, the homeroom teacher, and the Japanese teacher of English. We videotaped the 45 minutes lessons for 14 weeks. In addition, we interviewed the two teachers in order to deepen our understanding of the classroom environment. In the analyses of classroom conversation, we present four cases based on Toohey and Day's framework of accessibilities. Three of them, including interactional symmetry, playfulness, and learning identity, appear to allow access to the resources and one appears to block it.

In chapter 4, we conclude with some discussion about teachers in the English Activity lessons and curriculum and suggestions of English Activity lessons at the elementary school level.
Chapter 1

The trend of English language teaching in the elementary schools

In this chapter, we will discuss some issues about English language education at the elementary school level in Japan in order to contextualize our research and analyses of the English lessons at an elementary school.

Under the new Elementary Course of Study which was introduced in the year 2002, the "Period of Integrated Study (PIS)" or "Sogoteki-na Gakushu-no-jikan" was introduced. According to this Course of Study, the goal of the PIS is “to cultivate ways of learning and thinking and an attitude of trying to solve or pursue problems independently and creatively.” To achieve that goal, each school chooses some cross-curricula topics such as environmental studies, social welfare, information and communication technology, and international understanding. English conversation is taught as one of the options in international understanding. The English conversation lesson at the elementary school level is called “English activities” and contrasts with the formal English lessons taught in the junior and senior high schools. We use the term “English Activity” to differentiate it from activities employed in a lesson, although it is not yet a formal subject name.

“The practical handbook for elementary school English activities” by the MEXT states the aims of the English Activity lessons as follows:

Exposure to English during these years is extremely important not only for developing communicative ability but also for
deepening international understanding. “English activities” amount to experiences that expose students to other cultures and as a media for promoting contact with people from other countries or contact with other cultures, they encourage a desire to use English. Their primary purpose is to foster interest and desire—not to teach a language. (MEXT, 2001, p. 123)

According to a survey reported by the MEXT in June 2004, 88.3% of the elementary schools (19,897 schools in total) in Japan introduced English Activity lessons (see Figure 1 below). In these schools, the English Activity lessons are provided mostly during the PIS, and some of them are provided in Special activities time (“Tokubetsu Katsudou”), or other time outside the curriculum, recess or after school. Also, these lessons which were carried out in the PIS were allocated about ten periods a year on average (about 10.2 periods for the third graders, 10.1 periods for the fourth graders, 10.5 periods for the fifth graders, and 12.1 periods for the sixth graders, see Figure 2).

Figure 1. The percentage of elementary schools in which English Activity lessons are provided in the 2003-2004 school year
Figure 2. The average period of English Activity lessons in the 2003-04 school year (‘Others’ indicate outside the curriculum; during recess or after school.)

Figure 3. The percentage of elementary schools sorted by the total periods spent on English Activity lessons (the sixth grade)

Figure 3 more specifically represents the total periods spent on English Activity lessons per year provided for the sixth grade and its percentage of schools (1 period is a 45-minute lesson). As the figure indicates, the periods spent on English Activity are varied: almost 50% of the school provided 1-11 periods per year, 20% provided 12-22 periods. These numbers are considered to be small because 35 periods will be spent if a lesson is given...
once in a week.

The survey also reports that English Activity lessons included, for example, singing English songs and playing English games, having cross cultural experiences, and doing simple English conversation exercises and English pronunciation exercises.

Figure 4. Types of activities employed in English Activity lessons (the sixth grade)

Figure 4 shows that the most common activities employed in lessons for the sixth grade “English songs and games,” which over 90% of the schools surveyed employed in the sixth grade. “Simple English conversation exercises” and “English pronunciation exercises” are also common. The survey clearly suggests that the main purpose of the English Activity at an elementary school level is to let students experience English language activities as well as foreign cultures rather than to acquire skills necessary for academic language use (see the site for more detailed information: http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo3/siryo/015/04070501/005.htm).
Chapter 2
Background of the present study

In this chapter, to clarify the theoretical framework of the present study, we briefly review previous studies that investigated classroom interactions from sociocultural points of view (Toohey, 1998; Toohey and Day, 1999; Toohey, Waterstone and Jule-Lemke, 2000; Toohey, 2000). Toohey (2000) reported a longitudinal ethnography of a group of children learning English as a second language in a Canadian school from the beginning of kindergarten to the end of Grade 2. She also discussed how practices involving identity construction and resource distribution and discursive practices affected the children's opportunities for learning English. In the following sections, we focus on Toohey and Day's criticism about the research in second language acquisition and alternative perspectives about foreign language education based on sociocultural theory. Then we briefly review Toohey and Day's report with regard to accessibilities of resources.

2.1 Concept about second language learners and learning

Toohey (2000) discusses how to conceptualize second language learning and learners. She criticizes the traditional second language research perspective of second language learners and learning, arguing that the concern of such second language learning study, which has the perspective of behaviorism and individualism, is "to investigate the processes by which individual internalization and target language are taken to be unproblematic and uncontested" (Toohey, 1998, p. 62). According to
Davis (1995), there has been a "dearth of socially situated SLA studies," and it is necessary to regard acquisition "not only as a mental individualistic process, but one that is embedded in the sociocultural contexts in which it occurs"(p. 432).

Toohey (2000) argues that "SLA research has commonly conceptualized individuals as attached to their individual characteristics" (p. 6) and many authors (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco, 1978; Rubin, 1978) have hypothesized that "good language learners (both adults and children) have different mental strategies and traits from poor language learners" (p. 6). She criticized these hypotheses, claiming,

although the study revealed little empirical support for the hypothesis of differential strategic processing of second language input, and only weak support for the notion that good language learners had distinctive traits or characteristics, the authors argued that better methods for demonstrating internal processing and for assessing personality and cognitive characteristics would strengthen support for the hypothesis. (Toohey, 2000, p. 7)

She also indicates there are no considerations of how social relations among learners in some studies of child second language learners affect social adjustment or learning styles.

As an alternative conceptualization about learning a foreign or second language, Toohey suggests that second language learning is socially situated based on a sociocultural theory of learning (Rogoff, 1994, 1995; Norton, 2000; Willet, 1995). From this perspective, human learning is understood by observing an "activity" or "event" as the unit of analysis.
2.2 Toohey and Day's study (1999)

Toohey and Day (1999) reported, as one part of their ethnographic research, on children learning English as a second language for four years from the beginning of kindergarten to second grade. About 50% of the students at the school they researched had a language other than English, including Punjabi, Polish, Cantonese, Thai, French, Spanish, and several others, as their home language. They conducted half-day observations in the children's classrooms once a week. During the observations, they took field notes, audiotaped, and videotaped the children for 2 hours once a month. They also transcribed these audiotapes and all the video recordings.

Toohey and Day (1999) examined "how some discursive practices of the classroom seem to allow sharing of community linguistic resources and how some do not seem to allow this access" (p. 43).

One of the cases that seems to allow the children to access the community resources involved songs and choral repetition in the classroom; these activities provided playful situations for the children, and thus did not threaten the children's positions of identities. In such situations, the children felt so at ease they were able to share community knowledge, including language use, in the mainstream classroom. Therefore, their language became rich and the degree of their participation in the community increased. The following is an interaction that seems to give the children a site for play with words and thought. Two girls are having an exchange just after class.

Sally: (_ ) have a big HEART.
Hari: Dicky dicky dinosaur eating the plant.
Sally: Ha, ha, ha. Dicky dicky dinosaur eating some hearts.
Hari: Dicky dicky dinosaur eating some plant, jump in the rock (?) and drink the water.
Sally: Dicky dicky dinosaur comes to our lake.
[H]icky dicky
Sally: [Dicky dicky dinosaur eat some plant
[dicky dicky
Hari: dicky dicky dinosaur swimming on the water.
(Toohey and Day, 1999, p. 44)

Two children enjoyed the rhyming story “Dicky, Dicky Dinosaur,” which the teacher had just read in the class. The children used the phrase “eating some plant” instead of using the word “herbivore” which had just been explained by the teacher in the class. Songs and rhymes gave the children words and thoughts to play with; in other words, a place to use their own language.

On the other hand, Toohey and Day discussed ways in which the whole-group-discussion format might block children’s access to community resources because of a particular structure of the classroom discourse; the IRE (Initiation, Response, Evaluation) or IRF (Initiation, Response, Follow-up) sequence. This IRE/F sequence represents a common classroom genre in which a teacher asks a question, a student responds, and the teacher evaluates the student based on the student’s response (Cazden, 1988; Edwards and Westgate, 1994; Mehan, 1979; Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Wells, 1993). The IRE/F sequence is “effective in maintaining order, regulating participation, and leading the students in a certain predetermined direction” (van Lier, 1996, p. 156). However, it is criticized because the IRE/F sequence “reduces the student’s initiative, independent thinking, clarity of expression, the development of conversational skills (including turn taking, planning ahead, negotiating and arguing), and
self-determination" (van Lier, 1996, p. 156). When the IRE/F sequence is dominant in the classroom, the students are constrained to use English in more creative ways because of the teacher’s control (van Lier, 1996; Yoshida and Mochizuki, 2002).

We introduce one of the examples from Toohey and Day’s research, which presented a long IRE sequence in which the teacher asked students about food groups in a teacher-led discussion setting. In the case below, the teacher started the discussion and asked for the name of one of the food groups. While the students were seated on the floor around the teacher, one of the students, Surjeet, was called on to answer.

Teacher: No Surjeet, it's not on the ceiling dear; it's right up here in front of you. Tell me the name of one food group, one of the four food groups.

5-second pause

Surjeet: (quietly) Apple?

Teacher: Surjeet, I need the name of the entire food group. Apple is part of a particular food group. The names are written right there dear.

11-second pause

What's the name of that food group, that apple belongs to?

Surjeet: (answers very quietly)

Teacher: I can't hear you honey, a little louder.

Surjeet: Veg-e·tables, veg-e·tables

Teacher: Pardon me? (leans forward, 6-second pause)

What is an apple, dear?

Surjeet: Fruit

Teacher: An apple is a fruit so it belongs to the fruit and?

Surjeet: Vegetables

Teacher: Thank you dear. The fruit and vegetable group.

(Toohey and Day, 1999, p. 47)
The teacher in the first utterance responded to Surjeet negatively and led her to correct her answer by indicating where the answer could be found, but Surjeet kept quiet. Though Surjeet subsequently tried to answer the question, her answer was not the one the teacher had demanded. In the third utterance, the teacher asked in which food group apples were classified, and Surjeet did not answer; she kept silent. After a few more requests by the teacher, Surjeet finally correctly answered the name of the food group. In such a situation when a student has to respond to a teacher individually, Toohey and Day argued that the student could not access peers or even the teacher.

In that research, Toohey and Day indicated two kinds of practices, one that appears to facilitate the children’s access to community resources, and one that appears to block the children’s access to community resources. Songs and rhymes, as shown in the former example, allowed the children to share the classroom resource because they did not threaten the children’s identities and they allowed a playful language activity. The whole-group-discussion format with the IRE sequence, on the other hand, did not allow the children to share community resources, language use and language knowledge in particular.

Toohey and Day’s framework of the accessibilities of resources gave us a perspective on foreign language learners’ learning process. How can we apply this framework of accessibility to the Japanese elementary school students taking English lessons? In the next chapter, we will analyze some of the classroom practices based on this perspective of accessibilities of resources in English lessons.
Chapter 3
Analyses of the classroom

In this chapter, we will describe the elementary school English lessons that were observed and, based on the research framework suggested by Toohey and Day (1999), will further analyze the lessons by focusing on some communicative events that are of particular concern to the research questions to be presented in the present study.

3.1 School setting

The elementary school observed in this study was Shimotojo Elementary School, a public school in Ono city in the middle of Hyogo Prefecture. The school is located in a suburban area of the city. The total number of students in the school was 342 when the research was conducted.

As was described in Chapter 1, English is not yet a formal school subject, and English conversation can be taught as one of the options in the PIS. Shimotojo Elementary School began English Activity as a part of the PIS three years ago. During the year in which the observation was conducted, the lessons were offered once (45 minutes) a week to the students from the third grade to the sixth grade. We observed one of the two sixth grade classes from April to July, 2004.

3.2 Classroom setting

When the school year began in April, the students in each class were rearranged into two homeroom classes. Thus, for the homeroom teacher, half
of the students were new and the other half were from the class he had taught when they were fifth graders. English Activity lessons started in the second week of April. The lesson was always taught by two teachers in a team-teaching style. One teacher was Mr. Yoshinori Onishi, the homeroom teacher (HRT) of the class, who had twenty years' experience teaching at the elementary school level. The other teacher was Ms. Tomomi Tomofuji, a Japanese English teacher, who had taught at junior high and elementary school levels for 28 years and had begun teaching at the school as an English teaching specialist three years ago. Mr. Onishi and Ms. Tomofuji cooperatively planned the sixth graders' English lessons and the curriculum. Also, teachers who were native speakers of English occasionally visited the school as assistant Language teachers (ALTs), although none were present in this class during our observation.

The classroom of 6-2 had been used as a home economics room, and it was relatively more spacious than the other ordinary classrooms. The twenty six students usually sat in four or five lines in pairs and sometimes rearranged the classroom structure when they did activities or games in English lessons.

The lessons typically began with the following greetings.

JTE: Stand up everybody.... Good morning class
Ss: Good morning, Tomofuji sensei, Yoshida-sensei, Fukushige-sensei, Onishi-sensei.
JTE: How are you?
Ss: I'm fine, thank you. How about you?

(Note: "Yoshida-sensei" and "Fukushige-sensei" refer to the researchers who observed the lessons.)
After the greetings, JTE talked about weathers for a short time. Then the students usually sang English songs of the week with the teachers. They sang while reading a sheet on which the lyrics to the songs were written in *katakana* because they had not yet learned how to read in English.

The topics of the first two lessons given in April were "food" and "numbers." The teachers used a rhythm box and picture cards they had made in order to let the students practice these English words and some sentences. Many of the nouns about food and numbers, the Japanese English teacher said, had been practiced when the students were in the fourth or fifth grade. She let the students review and get reaccustomed to the English lessons. When the students answered with the English name for the item on a picture card presented by the teachers, not all of the students answered vigorously and sometimes they answered in Japanese. These events suggested that the students were not all comfortable joining in the English lessons at that moment.

In May, the content was mainly focused on animal names. The teachers introduced other English songs that included animals and numbers. They also showed the students several animal pictures and let the students answer the question "what's this?" and talked about pets asking questions such as "Do you have any pets?," "How many ... do you have?" and "I have a ..., I call it ...," etc.

When the students practiced the targeted sentences, the teachers used a rhythm box and the students practiced these sentences by chanting them to the sound. After this practice, they played games in which the
students enjoyed using the targeted structures. For example, after they practiced the “Do you have any pets?” sentence, the teachers passed an animal picture card to each student. By using the cards the students asked their friends “Do you have any pets?” and the queried students were to answer as if they had the animals on the cards. Their task was to find a friend who had the same animal card.

In addition to these language practices, the students began another language activity, in which they read aloud an English version of a traditional Japanese story for children called *Kasajizo* (see Appendix). At the beginning of this project, Mr. Onishi told the students that the goal of the activity was to perform a reading theater and read it to younger students at the school. Although the students were very familiar with the story, they had to put *katakana* in the English words, which allowed the students to pronounce the words more easily. At first, the students listened to the eight-page story and read aloud the first two pages following the JTE. Sometimes the teachers used a Japanese translation of the story and had the students read it aloud so that they were able to understand the emotions and feelings of the characters in the story. At the end of each lesson, the students wrote their reflections on the activity on the reflection sheet.

In June, the topics of lessons were object names and color names. The students practiced object names and color names while using picture cards. Also, the students practiced several question and answer sentences such as “What’s this?”, “It's a ...,” “Do you have ...?” in the topic of object names. And when they practiced color names, “What color is this?” “What color do you like?”—"I like ... because ...,” and “What color do you have?” were targeted.
After the students practiced these sentences by answering in chorus, they played an interview game.

In reading *Kasajizo*, the students read two or three pages per lesson. At the end of June, they were able to read the whole story aloud in English and some of them appeared to have memorized certain phrases or words in the text. After finishing reading aloud with the whole class, the HRT let the students assemble into four groups of six. Each group was assigned two pages as their own part. In almost all the lessons in July, the students practiced reading the pages in groups and each group presented their recitation in front of the classroom. Each group gradually elaborated on how to present their recitations; some groups read aloud using exaggerated intonations and gestures to express the characters' feelings.

In July, the students practiced the recitation harder because some high school students from Lindsay city in the United States, which is a sister-city of Ono, were expected to visit the school and the sixth graders were going to present *Kasajizo* to the visitors. In the lesson before they met the visitors, the teachers talked about the city and let the students prepare questions they wanted to ask the American students. On the day the American students visited, the whole school had a welcome party with the American students and gave a presentation in the gymnasium that included several songs and a Japanese traditional dance. In addition, some of the sixth grade students acted as guides and gave a tour of the school to the visitors in English during recess, and all the sixth graders presented the *Kasajizo* reading and had an exchange with the visitors for about forty minutes.
3.3 Research questions

In the following sections, we will examine how the students participated in the English lessons by applying the framework presented by Toohey and Day (1999), which was briefly reviewed in the previous chapter. First, we specifically question whether it is possible to perceive whether the students access the resources shared in communities such as the class or groups during English lessons at this elementary school. In order to attempt to determine this, we first discuss what the resources are in the 6-2 class community and what the word ‘access’ implies in the English lessons.

Toohey (2000) views resources to be materials like books, resources for task completion (notebooks, crayons, scissors, rulers, glue sticks, etc.), peers and their words and ideas, and the expertise of peers and teachers. What Toohey was most concerned about was how the ESL learners who were just enrolled in the mainstream classroom would access these resources, especially linguistic resources, through several activities. Thus, in their research, “access” indicates the process in which the learners can participate in the several language activities using the English language with their classmates or the teachers.

A question raised here in the present study is what these resources are and what the sixth graders “access” in their classroom. We need to clarify differences in context between Toohey’s research and our research. Toohey and Day (1999) investigated the process of ESL learners’ participation in the mainstream Canadian primary classrooms. They focused on the circumstances under which their participation was facilitated. Therefore,
interactions among participants in their research are all in English; the study focuses on the process by which ESL learners learn to join in native English speakers' communities. On the other hand, the students in our research learned English as a foreign language and the purposes of the English Activity were to get students to experience a foreign culture and language and foster their interests, not to teach the language. Thus, the participants' interactions in our research were conducted in two languages (i.e., Japanese and English). We found that many interactions in fact occurred only in Japanese. Considering that the students in our research are learning in both Japanese and English, both languages are important resources for the students. We assume that the resources in this elementary school classroom are materials, the teachers' and the students' peers' ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and the two languages. The students in this Japanese elementary school are accessing these resources by participating in the English Activity lessons. Therefore, we also assume that their accessing various resources in this context means that the elementary school students are communicating via these resources.

Based on the discussion above, we will investigate the following two research questions: 1) In what situations is the students' access to the resources facilitated, and 2) under what situations is this access blocked?

3.4 Methodology

We recorded every lesson with video cameras and took fieldnotes during the lessons. In the fieldnotes, the observed behaviors of the students and the teachers were described in as much detail as possible. We also
transcribed some communicative events recorded on the videos which seemed to be relevant to our research questions.

Before and after each lesson, we talked with the teachers about the lessons and clarified any questions I had during the lessons. In addition to these discussions, we interviewed the HRT in June. I also had discussions about my ideas with my supervisor, who gave advice about English lessons at this school.

3.5 Analyses of classroom conversations

3.5.1 Language activities that facilitate access to resources

In this section we examine three communicative events, and these interactions will be explained in terms of three types of concepts, interactional symmetry, playfulness, and learning identity, which presumably facilitate the students' access to the various resources defined above.

3.5.2 "How old are you?": Interactional Symmetry

The following interaction is an exchange between the teachers and the students observed at the end of April. Before this exchange, they practiced chanting two sentences: "How old are you?" and "I am ... (years old)." Then the teachers passed out cards bearing numbers to each student and had the students ask each other's ages by using the cards (See 3.2). After this activity, the JTE was about to finish this activity by saying "OK, mata jyaa otousan okaasan nimo kiiteagete. (Ask your parents the question at home)."
When the students heard the first line by the JTE, some of them quickly responded that their parents would tell a lie about their ages (line 02). Then, in order to demonstrate how to ask their parents' ages, the JTE asked the HRT how old he was in English. The HRT answered, “I'm twenty eight” (line 04), which was not his real age. The students understood his joke and responded that they knew he was over thirty in their Japanese dialect. Moreover, the HRT answered that he had stopped counting his age anymore.

In this case, this interaction between the students and the teachers is more like a daily conversation, in spite of the fact that their social status in the classroom is unequal. In the social construct, the teacher has more authoritative power because the teacher is older and more knowledgeable and has an agenda regarding elements inside the classroom, as van Lier (2000) says. However, in this event, the inequality in this relationship was
not evident, at least not in the verbal interaction between the teacher and the students, even though the event occurred inside the classroom. The teachers and the students appeared to enjoy talking with each other. In this interaction, equality in talk or what van Lier (1996, 2000) calls interactional symmetry is clearly observed. He suggested that symmetry refers purely to matters relating to the talk and the interaction itself. In terms of the characteristics of conversation..., symmetry refers to equal distribution of right and duties in talk. More precisely, interaction is conversational to the extent that it is oriented towards symmetrical contributions. (van Lier, 2000, p. 175)

Extract 1 shows that their exchanges were not prepared as they are in traditional IRE or IRF formats, and that the interaction was more symmetrical and the students enjoyed interacting in this manner with their teachers.

The next case also shows that the students and the teachers enjoyed their interactions. Here we will focus on playfulness in a language classroom.

3.5.3 “I have three elephants as pets.”: Playfulness in a classroom

In Extract 2, the two teachers demonstrated how to ask targeted questions like “Do you have any pets?” and “How many pets do you have?” The students responded to the demonstration in Japanese.

Extract 2

08 JTE: Hi, Onishi-sensei. Do you have any pets?
When the students heard the word 'pet,' they expected small animals such as dogs or cats. Contrary to their expectations, the teachers told the students that they owned tigers and elephants as pets, which led the students to comment that they could not have those animals as pets and that those animals should be in a zoo (lines 19 and 20). They shared a playful interaction, as this case indicates.

In both Extract 1 and Extract 2, the students communicated with the teachers through talking about their realities outside the classroom. The students understood the teachers' utterances and responded to them in Japanese. As far as the interaction is concerned, the participants put aside their social roles in the classroom for a while and enjoyed communication as
if they were joking outside of the classroom (Yoshida, Imai and Matsui, 2003). Conversation occurred in the classroom because of the playfulness of these two discourses. Moreover, these playful exchanges “are an important part of the language learning process” and “also lead students to an understanding of multiple forms and meanings of words” (Yoshida et al., 2003; Sullivan, 2000).

In both cases, the fact that the students and the teachers had symmetrical interactions in spite of their social inequality facilitated the students’ participation in the activities.

3.5.4 “A discovery of new students’ trait”: Learning identity

In this section, we would like to focus on the Kasajizo recitation activity. Time spent on reading Kasajizo activities gradually increased from the end of May. The students read aloud the traditional Japanese story translated into English. While perusing an accompanying picture book, the students listened to the story from the JTE many times and practiced reading every scene aloud in unison. When they read the scripts, they read katakana put in the scripts.

After reading the story with all the students many times aloud, the teachers asked the students to volunteer to read and show the pictures in front of the class. Six students volunteered to come up to the front of the classroom to do so.

After the lesson, we discussed the students’ presentations with the teachers while playing back the video recordings. Both teachers said that they were surprised because some of the students who volunteered to
present the story in front were usually very quiet in other classes like mathematics or Japanese language class. Why were those students able to read the story in front of their classmates, even though those students were not outspoken in other subject lessons? One reason is that the students were familiar with this story and were able to practice many times, which may have boosted their confidence. Therefore, they might feel daring enough to perform in front of others. However, it is still unclear why even the homeroom teacher was surprised by those students' volunteering to do the presentation. The homeroom teacher might be considered knowledgeable about elementary school students because he taught other subjects such as Japanese and Mathematics as well as English to the 6-2 students. Further, he had been in charge when the same sixth graders had been fifth graders. Moreover, because of his long experience as a teacher, he was able to predict many things about students even though he did not always clearly describe those things in detail. When we interviewed him, he told us that by getting involved in English Activity, he had become able to observe his students from a different perspective and actually discovered a trait in students in these activities that he had not observed in other subjects. He also mentioned that some of the students were able to act positively in English activities in spite of the fact that those same students could not do well in the other subject classes in the elementary school. In other words, these students could assume a different position in the English Activity lessons; they could find their own learning identity in the English Activity lessons. We assume each student possesses his or her own learning identity in each subject or in various learning opportunities in life at school. He or she will be motivated
and engage him/herself in learning a particular subject by accessing appropriate resources available to the learners. In the case above, the students were able to regard themselves as language learners and access resources including peers, teachers, materials, etc., when they were capable of finding a learning identity in the English lessons.

3.5.5 Language activities that block access to resources

We mentioned in the preceding section three situations that seemed to facilitate access to the community resources. In this section, we will analyze a discursive practice that appears to block their access to resources.

In the end of July, six high school students from a city in the United States, a sister city of Ono city, visited this elementary school (See 3.2 above). After a welcome party with the whole school, the sixth grade students and three of the American students (AS1, AS2, AS3) had time for an exchange. The visitors were given a guided tour of the school and were presented songs and a Kasajizo reading. After that, the sixth graders had time to ask questions of the high school students. All of the sixth graders sat on the floor of the room, which was more spacious than their usual classroom, and the three high school students sat in front of the elementary school students. Mr. Onishi sat on the floor between them and many other visitors sat ranged around the room.

Extract 3

22 HRT: Shitsumon taimu ikimasu. Nanika shitsumon shitai hito?

*It's time for asking questions. Anybody who wants to ask*
questions?

23 Ss:  
(laughing)

24 W:  
Eigo de?

In English?

25 HRT:  
Eigo de ietara eigo de... jya, mazu nihongo de.
If you can say it in English, in English, please... OK, first, in Japanese.

26 W:  
Yakyuu wa suki desuka?

Do you like baseball?

27 Ss:  
Baseball!  Baseball!

28 HRT:  
Minna de kikouka. San hai!

Let's ask it together. All together!

29 Ss:  
Do you have/like baseball?

30 HRT:  
Do you like baseball?

31 AS1:  
Oh, yeah.

32 Ss:  
(laughing and exulting)

33 AS2:  
We have a field.

34 HRT:  
Hai, tsugi douzo.

Ok, next, please.

35 S2:  
Donna supoutsu ga suki desuka?

What sports do you like?

36 HRT:  
Donna supoutsu, sukina supoutsu... What sports yattane. Itte miyouka. San hai!

What sports, favorite sports... "What sports," wasn't it?

Let's say it together. All together!

37 Ss:  
What sport do you like?

38 AS1:  
I like basketball.

39 AS2:  
Ah, basketball, baseball, and softball.

40 AS3:  
Umm.. Basketball, tennis, and I like to watch football, American football.

(04/07/16)
We looked carefully at the first two utterances by the teacher and a student. At first, when the teacher asked the students whether they had any questions, one of the students, W, raised a hand and stood up vigorously. In the next utterance, however, W hesitated a bit and asked the teacher whether he must ask the visitors in English and ended up asking in Japanese. The HRT's perception of this student was that W was a very active child and always showed leadership in the English lessons although he did not show high achievement in classes in other subjects. Considering the HRT's perception, the student W could have asked the questions in English.

His hesitation to ask in English could be attributed to the discourse structure of the event. This structure, which consisted of teachers' initiation, students' answering and giving questions to the listeners, was similar to the IRF structure. This IRF structure, different from daily conversation, seemed to block access to the community resources shared in the usual English Activity lessons. Added to this, the social relationship between the elementary students and the American students was one of inequality. Due to the IRF structure, this unequal relationship was carried over into the discourse and made interactions asymmetrical. Therefore, the student W had difficulties having a conversational interaction like those the sixth grade students including the student W were accustomed to in the usual English lessons.

Another reason is that student W could not find a suitable positioning from which to speak. As was indicated in the preceding section, some of the students in the 6-2 classroom, and in fact student W himself, participated in the classroom activities very actively, i.e., found their own
learning identities. However, in this exchange, they might have difficulty finding their learning identities because they had not yet established relationships with the visitors. Thus, such an unusual situation did not allow W to find his position. Our analysis suggests that the student W hesitated to ask questions in English because he faced a situation that could threaten his identity if he failed to perform.

Afterwards, with the teacher's guidance, many of the sixth grade students were able to ask several questions such as “suki na supoutsu wa nan desuka (What sports do you like?)” and “benkyou wa suki desuka (Do you like studying at school?)” The elementary school students finally could communicate with the high school students through accessing the resource. The resource here refers to a choral question-asking technique practiced by all of the sixth grade students, who had access to their identities established in the English lessons with each other. This resource facilitates their learning, as was argued by Toohey and Day (1999).

3.6 Summary

Several observations presented in the last few paragraphs have shown in what situations the students' access to the resources is facilitated, and under what situations the accessibility is blocked. We analyzed three situations in which the students could access the resources; when the students had symmetrical interaction with the teachers, when they had playful interaction, and when the students could find their own learning identities in the English lessons. On the other hand, when the discourse structure was fixed as it is in the IRF sequences, the students could not
interact symmetrically, and thus the students’ access to the resources might be blocked. In addition, when the students could not find suitable positioning from which to speak, it was difficult for them to access the resources.
Conclusion

In this study we observed and analyzed the English lessons at an elementary school for four months. The HRT's comment about students' ability in English and "the power of a classroom community" triggered our research framework. Following Toohey and Day (1999), who investigated ESL learners' accessibility to the resources in a classroom community at a Canadian primary school, we focused on some conversational events observed in the lessons and analyzed them in terms of the students' accessibility to the classroom resources. Specifically, our question was in which situations the students' access to the classroom resources is facilitated or blocked. In this chapter, we will present some suggestions about English Activity lessons at the elementary school level based on our research findings and conclude the paper by once again considering the HRT's remark on "the power of a class community," which motivated us to conduct the present study.

In chapter 3, three communication events were analyzed as examples of activities that seemed to facilitate students' participation in English class activities. The events were examined by referring to the three notions of learning: symmetrical interaction, playfulness, and learning identity. We believe these analyses provide perspectives that allow us to understand English Activity lessons more deeply.

One of the three situations displayed a symmetrical interaction, which implies equality in talk between the teacher and the students. We assume that, for a linguistic symmetrical interaction to happen in the
classroom, teachers must be democratic in how they conduct the conversation. During the lessons in the 6-2 classroom, the teachers neither dominated nor controlled the classroom discourse too much. They often provided opportunities for the students to express their ideas as well as listened to what the learners said. A very casual style of conversation between the teachers and the students was frequently observed during the lessons, and the participants seemed to enjoy talking with each other.

We often observed playful interactions, most of which the teachers did not preplan but accidentally constructed together with the students, as we presented in cases 1 and 2, where all of the participants shared laughter over several jokes (see 3.5.2 and 3.5.3). A language class will be more delightful for learners when these kinds of accidental discourse emerge. As some ELT researchers mention (Yoshida et al., 2003; Sullivan, 2000), these sessions of accidental discourse, or “playful excursions,” are a very important part of language learning in the elementary school context, because they are connected to the daily conversational situation, which allows the students to operate using the target language in a very meaningful way.

Another important finding was that the students found their own learning identities in English lessons. As we assumed in chapter 3.5.3, each individual student can possess his or her own learning identity in various learning opportunities within their school life, and a relatively novel type of learning identity is found in the English lessons. This is because the English lessons involve various types of activities including songs, music, physical movements, and games as well as traditional language practices. Such a rich variety of activities may not be found in the other school subjects. Thus, as
was evident in the interview described in the last chapter, the HRT was able to find students' new learning identities. We believe several of the group activities were very effective in the 6-2 classroom in fostering learners' learning identities. The HRT in fact told us in the interview that he intentionally brought in several kinds of group activities. For example, in the small group reading activity, we observed some of the students advising their peers about how to read or how to express characters' feelings. In the group presentation learners were able to display various language skills in several ways. Since the group activities were done in a very secure manner, the students were able to establish good relationships with their peers and show their "selves" (Toohey, 2000). In other words, each student was accepted by the others through group activities. When the students were encouraged to interact with other students through the group learning activities, they were able to form their learning identity more easily.

We raised a question about "the power of a class community," an expression we heard from the HRT at the very beginning of the present study. We now can recognize what the HRT implied by this expression. When "the power of a class community" is strong, it indicates that students' learning identities will not be threatened and under that condition the students are able to create their learning identity and find their own positioning in the English lesson. The teacher told us that the power of a class community had been reduced by half when the students were placed into two new classes. That is to say, initially the relationship among the students and the teachers was not stable in April, and thus the English Activity was not yet an opportunity where they could create their suitable identities. This
connectedness, or the bond among the participants in the classroom, was gradually strengthened by the frequent use of group activities and played a pivotal function in their understanding of English.

Last but not least, we would like to present some suggestions about future English language education at the elementary level. The content of English Activity lessons is not formalized in the curriculum yet and, thus, instructional objectives vary from one school to another. This fact at the same time implies that actual lessons are relatively less constrained, which allows teachers to create their own goals and teaching practices. We suggest that this might lead to a positive transformation of the classroom discourse that will facilitate increased student access to learning resources in the classroom. As we discussed, the frequent occurrence of symmetrical discourse between the teachers and the students is one example of a method that facilitates learning. In our observation, it was clear that the teachers carefully designed and carried out the English lessons that engaged students in various group activities. With this engagement, the teachers happened to able to create symmetrical interaction with the students. It also should be added that the HRT, who is not an English language specialist, played an essential role in the symmetrical talk.

It is possible that English language education might be a formal subject at the elementary school level in the future (the Central Council of Education, 2004). We hope every elementary school student in Japan will enjoy English lessons and establish their learning identities in the classroom.
Bibliography


Appendix

*Kasajizo* (Straw Hats for the Jizo)

Grandma: Tomorrow is New Year's Day, but we have no rice cakes to eat.

Grandpa: I'll go to town and sell straw hats.

Grandpa: If I can sell enough hats, I can buy some mochi rice.

Grandma: It's snowing heavily now. Please be careful!

Grandpa: Straw hats! Straw hats! Straw hats for sale!

Grandpa: Gee. I didn't sell any hats. I must go back home now.

Grandpa: My dear wife will be so disappointed.

Oh, my! These Jizo-statues are covered with snow. They must be cold.

I hope these straw hats will keep the snow off you.

Oh, no. I don't have a straw hat for the last one. Hmm, let me see...

Grandpa: Mr. Jizo, I'm sorry I have only my own hat. I hope you like it.

Grandpa: I didn't sell any straw hats so I gave them to the Jizo-statues.

Grandma: You did? That's good. I'm sure they are very happy.

We don't need rice cakes. We will just eat what we have.

Grandpa: We are happy to be healthy for the New Year.

Jizo: *Heave ho! Heave ho! Where is the old man's house? Where is the old woman's house?*

Grandma: Dear! I hear noises outside!

Grandpa: What's happened? They are coming closer and closer.

Jizo: *Here we are. What a relief! Happy new year, Grandpa and grandma!*

Grandma: Oh, my! What's all this?

Grandpa: These must be presents from the Jizo-statues.

Grandma: Jizo-statues, thank you for the presents.

Grandpa: Now we can have a Happy New Year!