

Oyako Eigo: An English Program for Parents and Children

Yukiko Yamami
Chukyo University

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In Japan, more and more children begin learning English at an early age. For successful early English learning, creating exposure to English at home is essential. *Oyako Eigo* (literally parent and child English) is one method that seems to meet this need. Most *Oyako Eigo* programs target children aged 1-3 years old, and in these programs parents participate in learning English with their very young children. I conducted an *Oyako Eigo* program from 2001 to 2012 and taught more than 300 children and their parents. This paper describes the benefits of parental involvement in early childhood English language learning. Also included are materials, lists of some procedures for an *Oyako Eigo* program, and a typical *Oyako Eigo* lesson plan. Finally, I argue that parental involvement is very important to create a home learning environment, and *Oyako Eigo* helps children become familiar with English.

幼児期から英語学習を始める日本の子供達が増えているが、早期英語教育を成功させるためには、家庭で英語に触れる機会を作ることが必要である。「親子英語」は1-3歳児とその親が共に参加し学習する英語プログラムである。本論では、早期英語教育における親の関わりの重要性を報告する。私は2001年から2012年まで「親子英語」プログラムを実践し、300人以上の親子の指導を行った。11年間の「親子英語」活動に基づくレッスン教材や方法を報告する。「親子英語」は親の参加により、家庭に英語環境を生み子供たちが英語により慣れ親しむことを目的としている。

IN RESPONSE to the global need for the use of English, the demand in Japan for early English education is increasing. In line with the rising demand, English programs for very young children have become popular among parents. Benesse Corporation, a leading company in the Japanese educational industry, reported that the number of its English language schools for children increased from two in 2000 to 1,300 in 2013, and it is estimated that it will reach 2,000 in 2018 (Nikkei, 2013).

Although many parents who send their children to English language schools hold a belief that starting to learn English early is effective, it is questionable whether just sending children to English schools once or twice a week creates enough exposure to English. In order to increase exposure to the English language, parents should create a daily learning environment at home. For the purpose of helping parents with such needs, *Oyako Eigo* seems to be an effective program.

I planned and conducted an *Oyako Eigo* program from 2001 to 2012 and taught more than 300 children and their parents over these years. *Oyako Eigo* literally means *parent and child Eng-*



lish in Japanese. Most *Oyako Eigo* programs are targeted at children aged 1-3 years old, and parents participate in the programs and learn English with their children. Once parents are involved in learning English with their children, it becomes much easier for parents to create more exposure to English at home and for parents and children to study English together, which is the purpose of *Oyako Eigo*.

Benefits of Parental Involvement

The benefits of parental involvement in children's education have been shown in many studies. Patrikakou, Weisberg, Redding, and Walberg (2005) stated that parents attending early childhood programs with their children is effective for improving children's academic achievement, and the benefit of parental involvement in children's education continues even into adolescence. Leibowitz (1974) said that spending quality time with parents boosts children's cognitive ability. Further, in her plenary address at The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) international conference in 2013, Linse said that parents were important in English education for young learners, and that parents needed to be positively engaged in their children's language learning.

In addition, some researchers have stated that cooperation between teachers and parents plays an important role in children's education. Patrikakou et al. (2005) wrote that successful implementation of parental involvement in children's education depends on teachers, and teachers should give parents practical and specific suggestions on how to assist children at home. Conversations between teachers and parents are essential (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Epstein (2001) asserted that parents and teachers should share the responsibility for the child's education. Based on these views, it may be said that creating a good relationship between parents and teachers is necessary.

Effects of Parental Involvement

Studies show that Japanese mothers tend to spend more time with children than Japanese fathers do. Hewlett (2011) reported that the average Japanese working mother spends more than 4 hours a day on housework and childcare. In contrast, Japanese working fathers spend barely 30 minutes on housework and childcare. Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris (1997) also reported that children whose mothers participate in activities at school and at home feel more competent and have better academic outcomes than those whose mothers are less involved.

Moreover, another line of research has reported that fathers' involvement in childcare is also important. It has been found that children whose fathers are highly involved in childcare have better cognitive skills and higher IQs by age 3. Because fathers use more *what* and *where* questions, children have to talk more and use more diverse vocabulary when they interact with their fathers (Rowe, Coker, & Pan, 2004). Culp, Schadle, Robinson, & Culp (2000) showed that when fathers are active in childcare, mothers are more patient and emotionally responsive, which enhances the quality of mother-child relationships and increases children's academic competence; the co-parental relationship affects the parent-child relationship.

Parents as Learner Models

Ichikawa (2012) argued that what is needed for language acquisition in early childhood is not training but spending quality time with parents. He went on to say that parents should neither outsource their children's education nor give up learning English themselves while forcing their children to do it. He further stated that parents should find purposes for learning English themselves, and they should be model English learners. Bandura (1977) also stressed that children acquire behaviors through the observation of others and imitate the modeled

behaviors. It can be concluded that parents who learn together with their children make good learner models for children.

Materials and Procedures of *Oyako Eigo*

This section describes how I planned and conducted an *Oyako Eigo* program from 2001 to 2012. My *Oyako Eigo* class met once a week, for 50 minutes, four times a month. I conducted *Oyako Eigo* classes at a local community center because it offered a large room with no desks or chairs, which was important to accommodate the many parents and children who attended, allowing them to move around freely; 15 children and their parents usually participated in each lesson. I also organized events several times a year, such as summer festivals and Halloween and Christmas parties, which were enjoyable for the parents and children and created a friendly atmosphere in *Oyako Eigo*. During the entire time I ran *Oyako Eigo*, I had an assistant teacher who took care of preparing materials for the program.

The most important aspect of an *Oyako Eigo* program is the provision of a daily English learning environment at home. In order to do this, *Oyako Eigo* focuses on learning English through songs. Singing songs is not only enjoyable but also a useful way to acquire a second language. Ludke, Ferreira, and Overy (2014) supported this view, reporting that singing phrases, rather than speaking them, can make learning an L2 easier. Beginning-level adults find singing helps them learn and remember the target language. Ludke et al. (2014) also stated that learning an L2 through musical activities increases children's confidence in speaking it, and the children reported that the songs they practiced in class repeated in their heads even after class.

I asked parents to buy the song CDs that were used in *Oyako Eigo* at the beginning of the school year. All the lesson information was always reported on the *Oyako Eigo* course website (currently closed), where parents could check the songs used that week and review them at home.

I introduced a new song every week, along with coloring, cutting and pasting papers, or crafts related to the song. I encouraged the parents and children to finish coloring the paper and listen to the song as homework. The following week, I gave a stamp to the children who finished their homework, and it seemed to motivate them.

There were different types of materials related to the songs every week. Some were on A4-size paper that children colored, cut, and pasted; others were fans, pendants, and finger puppets that children held or wore when they sang. I asked each family to prepare a notebook in which children could paste their colored papers. After 1 year of the *Oyako Eigo* program, the notebooks had accumulated many pages of coloring sheets from songs and had become the children's original English songbooks. The crafts became their own toys to play with while practicing the English songs.

In my program, the parents were always welcome to ask questions before and after the class, and it helped create a good relationship between the parents and teacher. In addition, I published monthly newsletters from 2001 to 2012, and I also uploaded weekly news to the website in 2012. I provided the parents with useful information on English songs, picture books, and daily English conversation phrases through the newsletters and website.

Details of a Typical Lesson

I conducted the lessons entirely in English and the assistant teacher played the CDs and the piano. There were virtually no breaks or pauses between these activities, which made *Oyako Eigo* an active and energetic program. Figure 1 is a typical lesson plan.

1. Attendance stickers and homework stamps
2. Opening Song: Knock Knock Hello (CD Super Simple Songs #1) ★
3. Singing time: Make a circle (CD Super Simple Songs #2) *
4. Greeting: Using a puppet.
5. Singing time: Row, Row, Row Your Boat ★
6. TPR: Total Physical Response with piano music
7. Flashcards
8. Singing time (songs from the previous week) ©
9. A new song (a song with craft) ©
10. Clean up time: Clean up! (CD Super Simple Songs #7) ★
11. Snack time: Snack Time song (Close and open your hands)
12. Story time
13. Goodbye song ★

Figure 1. A typical *Oyako Eigo* lesson. ★ indicates that the same songs were used each week; * indicates that the same songs were used for 1 month; © indicates that new songs were introduced every 1-2 weeks. CDs: *Super Simple Songs*, *Super Simple Songs 2*, *Super Simple Songs 3* (Super Simple Learning, 2005, 2006, 2007).

Following are detailed instructions for the typical lesson in Figure 1.

1. Before starting the class, the children received stickers on their attendance sheets and stamps on their homework.
2. Using the same song for opening *Oyako Eigo* each week was very effective. Every time the parents and children heard the song, it signaled the start of *Oyako Eigo*. While the opening song was playing, the parents and children were asked to make a circle and sit down.
3. Singing time was useful to warm up the class. The same song could be used for one month, until most parents and children remembered the song and felt comfortable singing it.
4. I greeted everyone by saying hello to the parents and children with a puppet. Using a puppet was helpful to break the ice. Some children were nervous because they were surrounded by many other adults and children in an unfamiliar place. However, greeting everyone with a puppet made the children relieved and sometimes it helped them stop crying.
5. When we sang *Row, Row, Row Your Boat*, the children sat on their parents' laps and the parents held their children and rowed. At the end of the song, I told the parents to say *give me a hug* to their children, and the children got a big hug from the parents. Hugging created a good relationship between the parents and children. Because this song was good for communication, we sang it all year round.
6. I gave Total Physical Response (TPR) instructions in English such as *walk, run, jump, fly, skip, turn, spin*, and *go up/down* while the assistant teacher played the piano to go with the movements.
7. Parents and children were told to come forward and sit around the teacher for flashcard time. The children found it easy to sit calmly and quietly after all the movement of TPR. New vocabulary, such as different foods, animals, insects, and household items, was introduced using the flashcards. Children repeated the words and questions such as *Do you like...?* or *Do you have...?* were asked.
8. Parents and children brought the craft or the notebook related to songs that they had made the previous week and sang the songs. Because reviewing songs was necessary for

reinforcement, I always tried to make time for reviewing songs using the song notebook and the related craft.

9. A new song was introduced every week. Parents and children were provided with coloring papers related to the new song. The children were asked to line up to receive the coloring papers. While the parents and children worked on coloring, cutting, and pasting, the new songs were played repeatedly. The purpose of making crafts or coloring papers was to take them home with the songs every week, so parents and children could sing the songs at home with them.
10. After about 5-7 minutes of coloring time, the cleanup song was always played. It signaled to the class to clean up their colored pencils, glue, and scissors.
11. The children cleaned their hands with wet towels or tissues and brought their own plastic plate to get snacks. I told them to line up and to say *Snack, please*. All children then sang a snack time song and said *Let's eat* before they ate. The children had to wait to eat until the snack time song was over, which was difficult for some impatient children. However, once they got used to the rule of singing the snack time song before eating, the children enjoyed the ritual very much. It gave them a good opportunity to use English phrases such as *Let's eat* and *Yummy*.
12. After the snack, it was story time. The parents and children came forward and sat down, and I read aloud a picture book. It was a good opportunity for the children and even for the parents to hear a story in English.
13. The teacher, parents, and children then sang a goodbye song at the end of *Oyako Eigo*.

Discussion

Many parents told me that they played the CDs they bought at the beginning of the year very frequently at home and found

themselves singing the songs with their children. When I played CDs and sang songs at *Oyako Eigo*, not only the children but also most parents joined me in singing. It was obvious that parents had memorized the lyrics by listening to the songs repeatedly. Several parents also reported that they liked the picture books used in *Oyako Eigo* story time, and they bought the books with the CD and enjoyed listening to them with their children at home.

Another indication of parental involvement can be seen in the participation of some fathers who attended class. Until 2010, only mothers participated in *Oyako Eigo*, but in 2011 some fathers started attending. Five fathers among 30 parents attended *Oyako Eigo* with their children in 2011 and 2012, and all of them attended approximately once every 2 months. One father told me that he had recently started studying English because he needed it at work, which motivated him to attend *Oyako Eigo*. He also told me when he first attended *Oyako Eigo* with his child that he found it useful and enjoyable and wanted to participate in *Oyako Eigo* as often as he could. It is hoped that participation in *Oyako Eigo* classes will encourage more fathers to practice learning English together with their children. Both parents' cooperation will certainly create a better English learning environment at home.

In addition, some parents reported that they did not like English before they attended *Oyako Eigo*. However, they found that English at *Oyako Eigo* was very different from what they had learned in their own school years, and they enjoyed singing English songs and reading English books with their children. Parents whose English skills were already high also commented that singing with children was pleasing, inspiring, and a totally new approach to learning English. There were also parents who started studying English more by themselves after attending *Oyako Eigo*.

Furthermore, some parents told me that their children cherished the English songbook they pasted together at *Oyako Eigo*,

took it everywhere they went, and sang songs with it. Others reported that children often sang English songs in front of their grandparents, and that the grandparents were so happy that they wanted to learn the English songs with their grandchildren. Many parents also reported that they kept the English song notebook and crafts made at *Oyako Eigo* even after their children entered kindergarten and sometimes sang English songs with them at home.

In summary, it can be said that the parents showed very positive reactions toward *Oyako Eigo*. Parental involvement was very significant in *Oyako Eigo*, and it helped the children to become familiar with English.

Conclusion

As I have stated above, the purpose of *Oyako Eigo* is to enhance parental involvement in children's English learning. Because English is not generally a language spoken in Japanese homes, it is necessary for children to have enough exposure to English at home to make English learning in early childhood effective. Feedback from parents indicated that *Oyako Eigo* helped create daily exposure to English at home.

To make early English learning effective, the home learning environment, where English learning can continue with parents' support, is essential. Language learning is a lifelong process and must continue after childhood. *Oyako Eigo* can certainly help children have a good start in their language-learning journey.

Bio Data

Yukiko Yamami is a MA candidate in the Department of World Englishes, Chukyo University. <yukiyukiyama81@yahoo.co.jp>

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