

The Perceived Usefulness of Chants Training for EFL Classes in Japanese Elementary Schools

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Abstract

This article describes a workshop on the use of incorporating chants into elementary school EFL lessons in Japan and attempts to determine whether such training is perceived as useful for elementary school teachers. Chants are an integral part of the curriculum and are generally accepted as being pedagogically valuable, but they are being used to varying degrees in actual classroom practice. Participants of the workshop were introduced to an original chant methodology, Guru Guru Chants, and to two prosodic features of the English language, chunking and linking. The post-workshop survey showed that the elementary school teacher participants view such training as useful and, moreover, seek further training to better equip them to instruct English language activities in their classrooms.

本稿では、日本の小学校 EFL 授業にチャンツを取り入れる有効性についてのワークショップを紹介し、その研修が小学校の教師に有用であると認識されるか否かを見極めようとしている。チャンツはカリキュラムの不可欠な部分であり、一般的に教育的に価値があると受け入れられているが、実際の教室の指導場面では教師によって活用の程度が異なっている。ワークショップの参加者は、独自のチャンツ方法論である「グルグル・チャンツ」と英語の韻律的特徴である、チャンキング、リンキングの2つを学んだ。ワークショップ後の調査では、参加者である小学校教師が、こうしたトレーニングが有用であると見ており、加えて、実際に教室で英語活動を指導するためのさらなるトレーニングを求めていることがわかった。

Keywords: Team Teaching, Elementary School English, Teacher Professional Development, Chants, Prosody

1. Introduction

In alignment with the policies of the Japan Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in the New Course of Study (2020), and the related promotion of professional development (PD) initiatives to support these policies, the authors herein describe their participation as instructors in a series of workshops aimed at assisting the efforts of elementary school (ES) home room teachers (HRTs) who are required to teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. This series of 10 workshops was created by Meikai University in cooperation with J-Shine and with five boards of education (BOEs) from the following prefectures: Tokyo, Chiba, Akita, Fukushima, and Niigata.

The authors were tasked with instructing two of the 10 workshops with the specific theme of using chants in the ES English classroom. During the workshops the instructors discussed selected prosodic features of English, then identified practical and research-based reasons why using chanting is a useful method for second language development, and finally demonstrated an original method for teaching chants which involves active participation of the students both when an assistant language teacher (ALT) is present in the classroom or when one is not.

While chants are included in officially approved ES English textbooks in Japan, they are often not used

by teachers in actual teaching situations or teachers may simply play the chants on an audio player without providing adequate scaffolding. It is the hope of the authors that the participating ES teachers gained insight into how to use chants in the classroom in a fun and active way, and also about the educational value of incorporating chants into ES English lessons.

This paper briefly reviews some reasons for teaching chants, describes the present study in terms of its research questions, analyzes the results of a post-workshop survey given to the participants, and discusses future directions on the instruction of chants in ES English classes in Japan.

2. Rationale

In this section, upon a review of the literature, the authors consider some theoretical and practical ways that using chants in the classroom can be beneficial to EFL learners.

2.1 Reasons for Chanting in the ES EFL Classroom

It is recognized in language and music education circles that musical activities like chanting and rhythmic speaking, singing, and listening reinforce and support language development (Mizener, 2008). Kawai (2019) points out that generally speaking chanting activities are accepted as helping young EFL learners to get used to the stressed-timed rhythm of English, to become motivated to learn the language, and to provide opportunities to learn cross-cultural knowledge and awareness, while also improving pronunciation and listening skills, especially for lower proficiency students (2014). Kawai states however, that at the same time, it is important to recognize there have been only a few empirical studies on the procedures and effects of chanting in various educational settings, and therefore much more research is needed to truly establish how chanting impacts the language development of learners in EFL classrooms. Despite the limited number of empirical studies specifically on chants and the varying methods of analysis these studies on chants have used, the authors of this paper will explore some of the potential advantages of using chants as an instructional medium from a broad perspective in the paragraphs below.

While pronunciation instruction in English language classrooms tends to focus on the practice of individual words and sounds, chants allow learners to practice English prosody in a fun, engaging, and natural way. According to Goodwin (2014), the English sound system can be divided into two categories: 1) segmental features and 2) suprasegmental (prosodic) features. Segmental features refer to the individual sounds of a language (e.g., vowels and consonants). Suprasegmental features are more global features such as rhythm, stress, and intonation, etc, which occur across two or more sounds or segments. It has been the topic of some debate as to which, the teaching of segmental features or suprasegmental features, should take precedence in the classroom. Many experts agree that rhythm, stress, and intonation patterns, among other prosodic features, are essential in meaningful communication and therefore, should be prioritized in classroom instruction (McNerney & Mendelsohn, 1992; Wong, 1987). Other researchers place priority on the learning of segmental features with training of relevant suprasegmental features depending on the interlocutors involved in the communication (Jenkins, 2001).

Goodwin (2014) provides a useful summary of the following basic features of English pronunciation: thought groups, prominence, intonation, rhythm, word stress, and connected speech (for detailed descriptions see Celce-Murcia et al., 2010; Ogawa & Higashi, 2017). As Goodwin (2014) suggests the two categories of segmental and suprasegmental features form an interdependent system, which is quite complex and requires training on the part of learners.

If one compares English and Japanese for example, it can be observed that not only are the languages different at the segmental level, but there are several significant prosodic differences as well. For Japanese learners, one of the difficulties in learning English pronunciation is the rhythm and stress of English. English is a stress-timed language which means that the “amount of time it takes to say a sentence in

English depends on the number of syllables receiving stress, not the number of syllables in a sentence” (McNerney & Mendelsohn, 1992, p. 188). Japanese is a mora- or syllable-timed language, in which speakers tend to stress and space each syllable in an utterance equally. Thus, chants provide a good way for learners to get used to the stress-timed rhythm of English and to improve other pronunciation features as well.

An additional reason that using chants is beneficial for learning involves the concept of the phonological loop. Nation and Newton (2009) explain that the phonological loop is an important mechanism in working memory. When a learner hears or says a word or phrase over and over it helps to keep that word or phrase in working memory, and eventually it may enter into long-term memory. The rhythmical and repetitive nature of chants can help learners to remember words and phrases. The above are just some of the potential reasons from a language learning perspective to employ the use of chants in the classroom.

3. The Present Study

3.1 Background & Context

With the purpose of preparing students to become members of a global society and to increase English language proficiency, from 2011 elementary schools began teaching English as foreign language activities in the fifth and sixth grades. However, as of 2020 these classes became a compulsory subject. At the same time, foreign language activities are continuing in the third and fourth grades. To support EFL classes and activities, ALTs, who are foreigners with L1 or near-L1 English language skills, are hired to work in primary and secondary schools. Often, these ALTs may only visit a school once a week and will have limited time to interact with the HRT. In some instances, ALTs are not available, and this requires school districts to adapt. For ES teachers, many of whom do not have a strong English background, the introduction of English education has been a challenge.

Recognizing these circumstances, in 2020, under the auspices of a MEXT grant, the Meikai Teacher-Training Support Center (METTS) together with J-Shine and the attending BOEs presented a series of five workshops under the name MEIKAI-JOE to three BOEs in three different prefectures that focused on English education in elementary schools. In that set of workshops, data obtained showed that 51% of the participants were current HRTs from grades one to five. Of that percentage, 9% were English specialists. Moreover, 52% of the participants had zero to three years of foreign language teaching experience in the classroom (Rode et al., 2021). This data underscored the need of elementary school teachers to have professional development training related to EFL instruction.

Due to the positive feedback received from the first MEIKAI-JOE, the organizers applied for a second MEXT grant to further expand the scope of the project. In 2021, a series of ten workshops were created to further meet the needs of ES educators responsible for teaching English as a subject in the fifth and sixth grades. Two more prefectures joined the event in 2021, for a total of five BOEs from five prefectures. This project was named MEIKAI-JOE Plus.

3.2 Workshop Design

Each of the workshops in the MEIKAI-JOE Plus project were sixty minutes in duration. To maximize the learning experience of the participants, a variety of pre materials and post materials were made available for their study. In regard to the workshop itself, the authors were charged with how to teach chants effectively in the classroom. Due to the complex nature of the English sound system as described above, the authors chose to focus on only two prosodic features of English pronunciation, which were 1) the chunking of larger spoken utterances into thought groups, and 2) the linking of words in connected speech. Thought groups occur when speakers make logical pauses in a stream of speech (Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

For the purpose of this workshop, the authors referred to this phenomenon as chunking. Connected speech, or the connection of sounds within and between words, occurs in all languages. Connected speech can occur in many ways: as contractions, blends, reductions, linking, assimilation, dissimilation, deletion, and epenthesis (p. 164). Through their experiences as English language educators, the authors determined chunking and linking to be the most suitable pronunciation areas to focus on during the chants workshop, with the intention to save more complex features for instruction in future sessions. Therefore, the motto of this workshop became “Chunk it,” “Link it,” “Guru Guru.”

3.3 Guru Guru Chants

Guru Guru Chants, an original method developed by the authors for utilizing chants in the EFL classroom, formed the centerpiece of the workshop contents. This method employs a common format for modeling language in EFL classrooms whereby an HRT and ALT model the target language, followed by including the students' reactions and then involving the students in the activity. The word “guru guru” means to go around in circles in Japanese. The choice of guru guru as a name for this method emerged for two reasons. First, as will be explained below, the method follows a circular repetition pattern. Second, as the Japanese language consists of numerous onomatopoeia for everyday actions it was believed such a name would appeal to elementary school-aged children. There were two types of Guru Guru models that were demonstrated during the workshop. The first type used the context of an ALT, an HRT, and the students. The second type offered an option for when a teacher has no ALT in the classroom and must conduct the lesson with only the students.

In the Guru Guru Chants with ALT Model, the ALT takes the lead. Since chants in the textbook played at their normal audio speed can be fast for students, the recommendation is that the ALT performs the chant at a slower speed. Clapping or the use of a beat can help set the rhythm. The ALT says the first line of the chant and the HRT repeats while keeping the beat. The HRT then turns to the students, thus including them, and they repeat, and then it goes back to the ALT. If the chant forms a dialogue, the ALT can start the dialogue and the HRT replies. The HRT can repeat the dialogue initiated by the ALT or simply ask the students “How about you?” The students reply. With each round, the speaking pace can increase and by the last round, the students can insert their own information, thus, personalizing the responses. Throughout this circular pattern, the rhythm should be maintained. See Figure 1 below as an

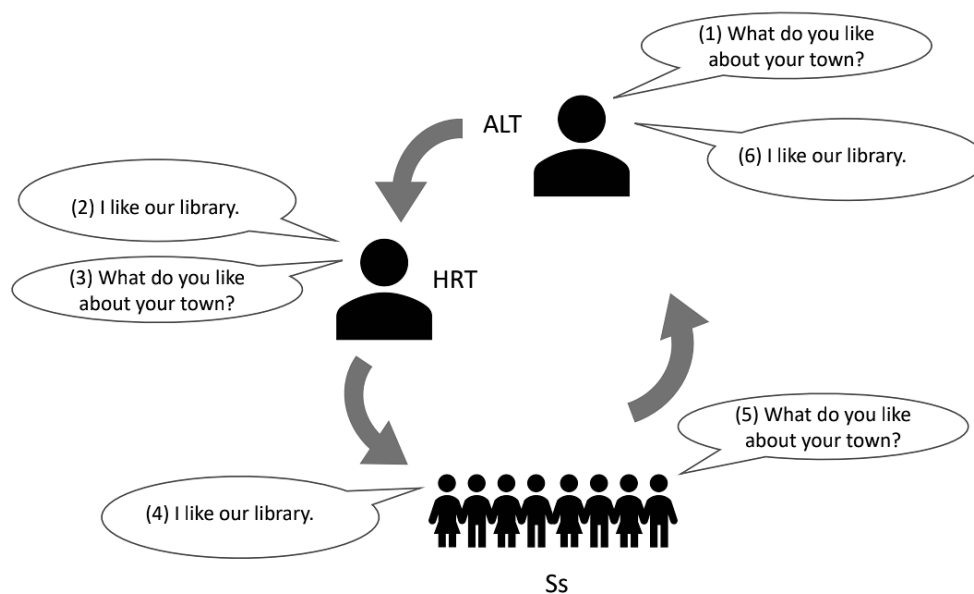


Figure 1 Guru Guru Chants with ALT Model

example based on the chant used in the workshop.

In the Guru Guru Chants with HRT Model, the HRT takes on the leadership role. This can be daunting for teachers who are not confident in their language skill, which is why we emphasized during training that the HRT does not need to be an expert. They can be learners with the students and by modeling such behavior, they can encourage their students to engage in the activities. In this model, students are employed as helpers. As Japanese classes usually choose two students each day to act as daily helpers for the teacher, it is easy to use these students in the model. However, teachers can select students by other means to assist them in performing the Guru Guru Chants. Once again, a beat should be employed and the HRT begins the first line of the chant. The student helpers will repeat and then it is the rest of the class' turn. With practice, the pace can increase and by the end of the unit, the HRT can use the textbook and audio and have the students shadow the chant with greater confidence. See Figure 2 below for further illustration.

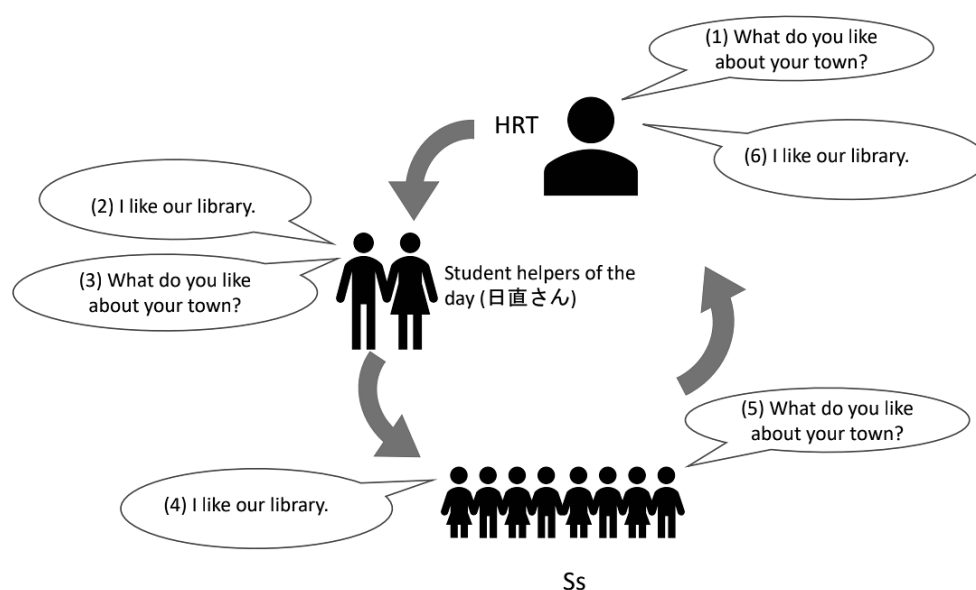


Figure 2 Guru Guru Chants with HRT Model

3.4 Research Questions

Given the endeavor of teaching chanting methodology with practical applications for ES teachers, the authors decided on two research questions for the project.

RQ1: What is the perceived usefulness of chants training among elementary school HRTs in Japan?

RQ2: How prepared and/or knowledgeable do ES teachers feel they are in the instruction of chants and features of English pronunciation?

4. Method

4.1 Participants

For this series of ten workshops, five BOEs were invited to participate, expanding the reach from the first MEIKAI-JOE which occurred in 2020. These five BOEs represented school districts from Tokyo, Chiba, Akita, Fukushima, and Niigata prefectures. The latter two were new additions to the MEIKAI-JOE Plus

event. The workshops were held online with many participants joining in directly from their schools, while other individuals logged in separately. The authors presented at the third and the tenth workshop, with the former being the focus of the current study. At the third workshop, there were 113 school-based participants and 58 outside participants, for a total of 171. Of this number, 153 participants responded to the survey.

4.2 Instruments

At the end of each workshop, the participants were asked to answer the same set of fourteen questions. These questions were designed and distributed by the organizers of the MEIKAI-JOE workshop series, the results of which were subsequently collected and analyzed. For this reason, the authors can only report on the questions asked and the results obtained. As the questions and responses were in Japanese, all English versions are translations made by the authors. The questions in the survey were as follows: 1) Were you able to understand the course contents? 2) Did the course contents meet the needs of your school situation? 3) Please explain if you answered I don't think so or I really don't think so. 4) Were the course contents appropriate for you? 5) Do you feel that you can make use of the designated course materials later? 6) Please explain if you answered I don't think so or I really don't think so. 7) Were the course instructors' explanations easy to understand? 8) Were the pre-task lessons useful? 9) Please explain if you answered I don't think so or I really don't think so. 10) Was the workshop task useful? 11) Please explain if you answered I don't think so or I really don't think so. 12) In general, were you satisfied by this workshop? 13) Please explain if you answered I don't think so or I really don't think so. 14) If a course such as this one were offered again, would you take it?

However, questions 15), 16), and 17) were added to the survey instrument at the specific request of the authors for the third workshop. As the authors were limited in the number of questions they could attach to the original survey, they concentrated on questions that they believed would give them insight into the research questions. The questions were as follows: 15) Would you like to try what you learned today in your lessons? 16) Would you like to learn more about English stress, rhythm, and intonation in English speech? 17) If a course such as this one were offered again, would you take it?

5. Results

See Table 1 for the results of the survey questions as responded to by participants after the third workshop took place.

6. Discussion

6.1 Analysis of the Post-Workshop Survey Results

As mentioned above, the first fourteen questions were designed by the organizers of MEIKAI-JOE and asked to participants after each session. The data collected provides the authors with valuable feedback on the workshop they presented. Based on the results, nearly 90% stated in question one that they understood or mostly understood the workshop's contents. Furthermore, according to the participants' responses to question two, 89% felt the contents met the needs of their school. While 22% indicated a degree of difficulty with the workshop contents in question four, 67% believe them to be at the appropriate level. In question five, 86% indicated they thought they could use the designated course materials later, which highlights the interest ES educators have for tools that will help them successfully teach EFL activities.

While the workshop was conducted mainly in Japanese, the lesson model demonstrations were conducted mostly in English. Nonetheless, 89% stated in question seven that they found the instructions easy to understand. Prior to the workshop, participants received preparatory or pre-task materials and

Table 1 Results from Post-Workshop Survey

Question N = 153	I really think so	I think so	I can't say either way	I don't think so	I really don't think so
1) Were you able to understand the course contents?	44%	45%	6%	4%	1%
2) Did the course contents meet the needs of your school situation?	42%	47%	10%	1%	0%
4) Were the course contents appropriate for you?	3% (too difficult)	19% (a little difficult)	67% (appropriate)	10% (a little easy)	1% (too easy)
5) Do you feel that you can make use of the designated course materials later?	34%	52%	13%	1%	0%
7) Were the course instructors' explanations easy to understand?	41%	48%	10%	1%	0%
8) Were the pre-task lessons useful?	28%	54%	17%	1%	0%
10) Was the workshop task useful?	37%	49%	14%	0%	0%
12) In general, were you satisfied by this workshop?	36%	46%	15%	2%	1%
14) If a course such as this one were offered again, would you take it?	34%	46%	18%	2%	0%
15) Would you like to try what you learned today in your lessons?	44%	44%	7%	1%	0%
16) Would you like to learn more about English stress, rhythm, and intonation in English speech?	39%	53%	7%	1%	0%
17) Have you ever taken a course on "chunking" and "linking" before?	20% (many times)	31% (1 or 2 times)	49% (never)	0%	0%

Note.

*Questions 3), 6), 9), 11) and 13) asked respondents to expand on the previous question if they answered I don't think so or I really don't think so.

*Questions 15), 16), and 17) were created by the authors for the purposes of this research.

lessons, which 82% found useful, according to question eight. During the workshop, participants were invited to mark on a worksheet (see Appendix A) where to chunk and where to link words in an ES textbook chant, as well as to join in during the model demonstration as if they were students. These tasks were viewed as useful by 86% of the participants in question ten. Question twelve asks participants for their overall satisfaction with the workshop and 82% indicated they were generally satisfied. With regards to participants' interest in taking a similar type of workshop as asked in question fourteen, 80% affirmed such an interest. This is a heartening result and adds to the body of evidence that ES teachers seek practical training that can be applied in the EFL classroom.

The last three questions go to the core of the authors' research. In question fifteen, 88% of the participants conveyed a desire to apply the chants training in their classes. Research question one queries the perceived usefulness of chants training among ES teachers in Japan, and these results would suggest that such training is seen as useful. Furthermore, 92% stated that they would like to learn more about stress, rhythm, and intonation. At the same time, through question seventeen, it was revealed that 49% had never had training in chunking and linking. These last two questions answer research question two, which questions the degree of knowledge that ES teachers have in being able to instruct chants and English pronunciation in the classroom. Question sixteen implies a need for greater training in this area as many teachers are not equipped with the knowledge they need (question seventeen).

7. Limitations and Future Directions

As this research took place within the framework of a ten-workshop series, the study had several constraints, such as time allotted, design of the research instrument, and format of the workshop. With these constraints in consideration, the authors only focused on two key features of English pronunciation, which were chunking and linking. Workshop participants would certainly benefit from future workshops, if other elements of English pronunciation are taught as well.

8. Conclusion

The workshop on how to use chants successfully in the ES English classroom was for the most part perceived as effective by participating teachers. It is evident from the survey responses that teachers would like more training in this area. Through this workshop, the teachers learned how to do Guru Guru Chants, a practical method that they could immediately apply in their own classroom contexts. As mentioned in the rationale for this study, it remains unclear to what extent using chants in the classroom directly affects the language acquisition of English for L2 learners. However, based on the research, one can hypothesize that there are many theoretical and practical advantages of using chants in the ES English classroom.

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Appendix A

Chants の効果的な使用
Effective Use of Chants
“I like my town.”

What do you like about your town? (2 回)

I like our library.

I like our pool.

I like our park.

I like our stadium.

We like our town very much.

What's missing in your town? (2 回)

We don't have a department store.

We don't have an amusement park.

We don't have a station.

We don't have a museum.

KEY チャンクには /, くっつく音には っ を書きましょう!

chunking /

linking っ