



## Strategies for Preschool English Language Learners

BY

Tony Minotti

Osaka Shoin Women's University, Department of Childhood Education Osaka, Japan



### Article History

Received: 09/06/2023

Accepted: 16/06/2023

Published: 18/06/2023

Vol – 2 Issue – 6

PP: - 24-29

### Abstract

*This paper discusses the need for a fundamental change in how English is taught in Japan. To this end, it is first argued that young English learners should be exposed to word families with high-frequency use, and second, it is proposed that scaffolded lessons are created. By teaching high-frequency word families, children should be able to make either a visual or mental connection to the real world so that they have a better understanding of the words, their meaning, and their use. On the same line, in the creation of a scaffolded lesson, educators should concentrate on three specific areas: continuity, contextual support, and intersubjectivity. By following these steps young learners of English will have a strong foundation in their journey to learning English.*

**Keywords:** word families, scaffolding, continuity, contextual support, intersubjectivity.

### Introduction

Teaching English to preschool students in Japan holds significant importance in their overall educational development and prospects. English has become a global language, and proficiency in it opens doors to various opportunities in today's interconnected world. These include global communication. English serves as a lingua franca for international communication. By introducing English at a young age, preschool students in Japan are exposed to a language that enables them to connect with people from different cultures and backgrounds.

Japan is currently in a tough situation, the population is aging at an ever-increasing pace, the birthrate is one of the lowest in the world, and the economy is stagnating. The Japanese government has worked hard to create solutions to these pressing problems. One of them is to improve the English language skills of the general population so that the country can better compete in the global economy. In 2020 Japan ranked twentieth in the world rankings of TOEIC scores (Lysemamu, 2020). Statics also show that Japan has one of the lowest TOEIC average scores in Asia (Roell, 2020). The reasoning behind this is that English proficiency is highly valued in the global job market. By teaching English to preschool students, Japan equips its future workforce with the necessary language skills to compete internationally. In an increasingly globalized economy, knowledge of English opens doors to job opportunities, business collaborations, and trade relations. To combat this issue the Japanese Ministry of Education has made English language teaching in elementary school's compulsory.

Even though for years, English has been taught in elementary schools in Japan as a non-mandatory subject, high school students who take English language proficiency tests, such as TOEIC, continually get lower scores than their counterparts around the world. Hence, the need for a fundamental change in the way educators approach English language education so that the next generation can be proficient in English. Because of this teaching English to preschool students in Japan carries immense significance. It equips them with a vital tool for global communication, cognitive development, cultural understanding, and future success. English education at an early age not only prepares them academically but also instills valuable qualities. By investing in English education for preschool students, Japan paves the way for a brighter and more globally connected future. This paper will argue that the earlier children are taught a new skill, such as language learning, the more solid the foundation for growing their ability becomes.

While teaching English to preschool students in Japan has gained significant attention and importance, there are still several issues that need to be addressed. These issues can provide valuable insights and guide further advancements in the field of early English education. These include optimal teaching methods with the goal of finding the most effective teaching techniques for preschool English education in Japan. There is a need to explore different instructional approaches, to determine which methods are most suitable for young learners. Some educational theories and approaches that have been adapted and applied to early language learning contexts include constructivism which emphasizes children actively construct knowledge through their environment. In the context

of English language learning, constructivist theory suggests that preschool students in Japan should engage in hands-on, experiential learning activities. They should be provided with meaningful and authentic language learning experiences that allow them to actively explore, manipulate, and interact with English language materials and resources. (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). Another approach that has been applied to early language learning is the Total Physical Response (TPR), TPR is an approach that emphasizes the link between language and physical movement. It suggests that preschool students can acquire English by responding to commands and instructions with physical actions. TPR activities involve the use of gestures, body movements, and kinesthetic experiences to reinforce vocabulary and language comprehension. This approach recognizes the importance of multisensory experiences in language learning and promotes active engagement and memorization (Richards et al., 2014).

Another approach is the socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of social interactions and cultural context in language development. This theory underscores the significance of meaningful interactions, scaffolding, and the incorporation of cultural experiences to support language learning (Saracho, 2023). Another influential theory is the (source) cognitive development theory, which highlights the role of cognitive processes, such as attention, memory, and problem-solving, in language acquisition. Strategies based on this theory focus on providing engaging activities, hands-on experiences, and opportunities for critical thinking (Wang & Wang, 2015). Additionally, the behaviorist theory underscores the significance of reinforcement and repetition in language learning, suggesting strategies that utilize positive reinforcement, modeling, and repetition to enhance language acquisition in preschoolers.

For this, two pillars of creating a foundation will be examined, and some examples of how to implement them in a classroom setting will be shown. Young English language learners (E.I.L) should be exposed to English vocabulary often, in a way that they can connect to their surroundings so that they have a better understanding of the meanings, and lessons should be structured to provide scaffolding to help language learning.

## Backdrop

A private kindergarten in East Osaka decided to introduce English classes to their three-, four-, five-, and six-year-old students to help them get a better foundation in language learning. The children at the Japanese kindergarten are divided into three classes according to their age. Their English language education begins in the middle class which has children between the age of four. During the semesters, the children are taught English for 30 minutes every second week for a total of approximately 16 classes a year. They also have the option of taking an extracurricular English language class once a week for 30 minutes for about 25 lessons a year. Higher-grade children, between the ages of five and six years old, are taught English once a week for 30 minutes for an average of 25 lessons per year. They also can enter an

extracurricular English class each week. The extracurricular classes are divided by age group, meaning that all students of the same age take the same class indifferent of their English language abilities. The length of the extra class is one hour, with a five-minute toilet and drink break at the halfway mark of the class. The class is taught approximately thirty times a year. All the children have no exposure to English outside of the English lessons unless the parents have them enrolled in out-of-school lessons such as a cram school, which is rare for children so young. For this report, only the higher-aged children will be studied.

## Exposure to English vocabulary

According to research by Tabors, children require multiple exposures to words to develop a rich understanding of their meaning and use. Educators should introduce interesting new words for children to learn in each classroom activity (Tabors, 2008). For the kindergarten classes, at the beginning of each lesson, a word cluster list based on the frequency of use is introduced. This means that children will be taught 'word families' that they will most likely use, see, and understand in their daily life. Some examples of 'word families' that are used but are not limited to this list are colors, numbers, family members, etc. Each week a new word family is presented, and the previous 'word families' are reviewed. The introduction and repetition of the word families take between five to ten minutes at the beginning of each lesson. Each word family consists of between seven to ten words, depending on the word family being taught, and the use frequency of the words. As R.F. Deich first reported back in 1972, remembering a color is directly related to the frequency of use of that color name (Deich, 1972). It makes more sense to teach a child the word 'blue' rather than 'azure' because the first one has better recognition in his or her surrounding environment. Still, introducing new 'word families' every week is not enough for the children to become proficient in English.

Children need to make connections to the words so that they have a better understanding of their meaning. As McGee and Richgels (2003) discussed in their work, presenting vocabulary thematically helps children make associations between words and scaffolds students' learning. At the Japanese kindergarten children are taught new word families each week, and while doing so pictures and photos are given and shown to help them understand the meaning of the words. For instance, when teaching the word family about occupations, photos of people doing their professions are shown. Children do not only listen and repeat the words but also use their other senses, such as touch, in selecting the correct occupation in a photo with different workers. This idea was reinforced by the work of Brabham and Lynch-Brown (2002) as they argued that teaching new vocabulary out loud and using explanations to help understand the words can support learning.

While introducing high-frequency word families and helping children understand the meaning of the words through mental and verbal connections are very good ways to help young learners become exposed to English, a third facet is also

important to help children connect to the new vocabulary that they are learning. This facet entails having children physically interact with the words that they are learning. In research by Barone and Xu (2008), it is argued that physically organized activities around a carefully chosen theme can help children make a connection to words, which in turn will help them create a mental image when remembering the word. In the aforementioned kindergarten when working in the word family of occupations, children are taught and practice gestures that will most likely be performed in the profession. Some examples are a firefighter holding a water hose, a cook cutting food, or a doctor giving a patient a needle. Other activities include using action words, while performing them, such as jumping, hopping, walking, running, etc. The goal of teaching new vocabulary to young learners of English is for them to remember and use the words as much as possible. To achieve this goal, it is important that educators use high-frequency word families and constantly review the words. It is also important for educators to connect the words to the real world so that it becomes easier for the children to remember them. This can be done by showing pictures or encouraging the use of other senses, so children have a better understanding of the meaning of the word. Finally, educators should try to physically connect the words to an action or an image. Using all these techniques will help young learners remember vocabulary words, nonetheless, it is only the first step that educators should undertake to help students become more proficient in English. Scaffolding is an important step in this process.

### Structure the lessons to provide scaffolding aid for language learning

Scaffolding is a key strategy for supporting preschool English language learners. It involves providing temporary support and guidance to children as they acquire new skills or knowledge. Scaffolding can take various forms, such as modeling, providing hints or cues, breaking tasks into smaller steps, and offering feedback. By providing appropriate scaffolding, educators can help children build on their existing language skills and gradually develop more complex language abilities. This strategy promotes active engagement, boosts confidence, and facilitates independent learning. (Spadafora & Downes, 2020). Research has shown that scaffolded instruction leads to better language outcomes, improved comprehension, and increased language production in preschoolers (Spadafora & Downes, 2020). The idea of scaffolding is to break up lessons into sections while structuring them so that the next step or section of the lesson becomes easier to understand and students are more likely to succeed at the pre-determined goals set out by the educator. Scaffolding aids can take various forms, such as visual cues or vocabulary lists. To illustrate, let's imagine a ladder, each section of the lesson is a step on the ladder, so if people try skipping a step the task of reaching the top of the ladder becomes much harder. For scaffolding to work two key components need to be followed. The first is for the educator to provide support that expands the vocabulary that the student already knows. An example of this would be to teach

students vegetable names (visual cues), followed by teaching the colors, in a way that encourages the students to associate the two vocabulary families (vocabulary lists). The second entails that the educator challenges the students until they master the task assigned to them. For instance, giving the students a task to draw the vocabulary words that they were taught, so that while doing so they repeat the vocabulary word to the educator before being allowed to progress to the next step. As seen in the image below, children are asked to draw a specific number with a corresponding color. When they complete the task of coloring the assigned number, they must verbally say the color and number in the order that the educator indicates, before moving to the next number. An example of this type of worksheet is shown in Table 1:

**Table 1**  
*Worksheet with numbers and colors for preschool students*

Orange 1	Blue 2	Pink 3	Yellow 4	Red 5
Purple 6	Green 7	Black 8	White 9	Red 10
Orange 11	Blue 12			

Scaffolding aids can enhance language acquisition by providing learners with additional support and guidance. Research studies have shown that when learners are provided with scaffolded materials, they demonstrate improved language comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and grammatical accuracy. The systematic and targeted support offered by scaffolding aids helps learners make connections between new and existing language knowledge, facilitating their language development. Van Lier (2004) believed that for scaffolding to succeed several factors are needed which include but are not limited to the use of continuity, contextual support, and the use of intersubjectivity. Scaffolding aids also contribute to learners' confidence and motivation by reducing the cognitive load and anxiety associated with language learning. When learners receive appropriate support through scaffolding aids, they feel more capable and empowered to engage with the language. This increased confidence and motivation positively impact learners' willingness to take risks, participate actively in language activities, and persist in their language learning endeavors (Pol et al., 2015).

### Continuity

Continuity refers to maintaining a consistent and coherent approach to language instruction over time. It involves building on previously learned concepts and skills while introducing new ones. Continuity is crucial for preschool English language learners as it helps reinforce language structures and vocabulary, promotes retention, and supports the gradual progression of language proficiency. An effective continuity strategy includes reviewing and revisiting previously covered topics, connecting new information to prior knowledge, and providing opportunities for practice and reinforcement. By maintaining continuity, educators can

ensure a solid foundation for language development and promote a smoother transition into higher levels of English proficiency (Dockett, & Einarsdóttir, 2017). For this paper, continuity will stress the transition from one lesson to the next. This concept recognizes that early childhood is a crucial period for a child's development, and the quality of their educational experiences can have a lasting impact on their future academic and social success. A child who experiences a smooth transition from one lesson to another helps to minimize stress and anxiety in the students. The use of continuity entails that educators repeat tasks continuously while connecting them to others. As shown in the diagram above students are given word families each week, and each week the word families are reviewed and expanded. This is followed by new word families that complete the previous word family. Students are first taught colors, and tasks are created based on this word family weekly, the following week the numbers word family is introduced, and it is connected to the colors one. In the example above students read the color, fill in the number and then tell the educator in English the color and number. If they are right, they are allowed to continue to the next number, if not they are retaught the color and number and asked to repeat the task. Evaluating the effectiveness of using continuity for language learning involves assessing the impact of providing consistent and ongoing language instruction and exposure over an extended period. The key aspect of continuity in language learning is to foster long-term language proficiency. Evaluating the effectiveness of continuity involves assessing learners' language proficiency and competence over time. This includes the retention and consolidation of language learning. It may include testing learners' ability to recall and utilize vocabulary, grammar structures, and language functions that were taught earlier in the learning process. By the end of the academic year, students gave a presentation to their parents to show off their English language abilities. Even though grades were not given the educators and parents were impressed with the language proficiency and competence of the students.

### Contextual support

Contextual support involves embedding language learning within meaningful and authentic contexts. It recognizes the importance of connecting language instruction to real-life experiences, activities, and situations that are relevant and meaningful to preschoolers. Contextual support provides children with opportunities to use language in purposeful ways, fostering comprehension, communication, and vocabulary development. Incorporating hands-on activities, visual aids, real-world materials, and interactive experiences can enhance contextual support. (Osika, MacMahon, Lodge, & Carroll, 2022) Research has shown that contextualized language instruction promotes deeper understanding, greater engagement, and improved language proficiency in preschool English language learners (Osika, MacMahon, Lodge, & Carroll, 2022). In early childhood education, contextual support becomes a crucial factor in shaping the learning outcomes of children. The contextual support for young children is the interplay between nurturing relationships,

quality learning experiences, and supportive environments created by educators. The idea of contextual support is for children to be in an environment that supports visual and modeling activities. As for the location of the English lessons they are taught in the student's main classroom. After each lesson, the vocabulary flashcards are placed on the wall or in a location in the classroom that is accessible to the students. In this way, the students are always able to see and practice their English even when they are not learning it. By doing this it provides children with opportunities to experience different cultural and linguistic perspectives, build their vocabulary, and develop their critical thinking abilities while they develop with confidence. This also helps to facilitate the transfer of language skills to real-life situations beyond the language learning context. Evaluating the effectiveness of contextual support involves assessing learners' ability to apply language skills and knowledge in authentic and practical settings. This was done through performance assessments, in which the students during the school year created real-world tasks for the parents to watch and evaluate their child's English language abilities. The students would sing songs and use visual aids to help express their feelings or show their comprehension of word families.

### Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity refers to the shared understanding and communication between individuals. In the context of preschool English language lessons, intersubjectivity involves creating opportunities for joint attention, interaction, and collaboration. It recognizes that language learning is a social process and that meaningful communication enhances language development. Strategies for promoting intersubjectivity include engaging in conversations, asking open-ended questions, encouraging turn-taking, and fostering peer interactions. Through intersubjectivity, children can practice and refine their language skills, develop social and communication abilities, and gain a deeper understanding of language and culture (Smyrniotis, 2023). This concept is particularly relevant to young learners of English who are just beginning to develop their language skills. By using intersubjectivity English teachers can help to create a more engaging and effective learning environment for their students. For kindergarten students, this is done with creative activities where students are arranged into teams where they had to solve words or word puzzles. The group of students works together to solve the problem and then its members take turns in explaining the puzzle message. If one of the children is not able to answer the question it is the responsibility of his or her teammates to provide help and support. By doing this the children not only work together and become friends, but they help each other learn by teaching their teammates when someone struggles. The effectiveness of intersubjectivity for language learning involves assessing the impact of social interaction, collaboration and shared meaning-making on learners' language development. This is done by providing learners with opportunities to engage in dialogue, negotiate meaning, and make sense of language in context. In the lessons that were taught at the school

comprehension tasks and listening activities were used to assess learners' comprehension skills, including their ability to understand spoken language, infer meaning, and grasp the intended message within a social context. This was done by asking students simple questions after activities to assess their understanding. Not only was teacher feedback used to highlight areas of improvement but also peer evaluations were used. This was done by asking students if they understood what their classmates were saying or if they corrected any errors that their classmates may have made.

## Conclusion

Over the last twenty years, economic trends have been declining in Japan, one of its causes is that Japan has not been able to globalize as effectively as other countries. The Japanese government has tried to implement various programs to overcome this problem. One of them was the creation of mandatory English education in the elementary school system, yet the average TOEIC scores in Japan keep decreasing. A fundamental change in the way educators approach English language education is needed so that the next generation can be proficient in English, which will help Japan become more competitive in the world economy.

Supporting English language learners in preschool requires the implementation of effective strategies that promote language development and create a conducive learning environment. Four key strategies that have been discussed are scaffolding, continuity, contextual support, and intersubjectivity. These strategies, when employed appropriately, can significantly enhance language acquisition and overall educational outcomes for preschool English language learners.

Research findings regarding teaching the English language to preschool students vary based on various factors such as study design, participant characteristics, instructional approaches, and measurement tools. Issues such as the effectiveness of different teaching strategies in English language learning and their usage were discussed. One of these strategies is scaffolding.

Scaffolding is a vital strategy that involves providing support to learners as they engage in challenging tasks. By breaking down complex concepts or skills into manageable steps, educators can guide students towards successful language acquisition. Scaffolding techniques such as visual cues or vocabulary lists. Can help preschoolers understand and use English more effectively. Additionally, incorporating hands-on activities, interactive games, and group work can facilitate peer collaboration and reinforce language learning.

Continuity is another crucial aspect of supporting preschool English language learners. By establishing a consistent and predictable learning routine, educators can create a sense of stability and reduce anxiety in the classroom. Consistency in teaching methods, materials, and language exposure helps learners build familiarity and confidence in using English.

Additionally, Contextual support plays a significant role in facilitating language development for preschool English

language learners. Providing meaningful and authentic contexts for language use enhances comprehension and engagement. Incorporating real-life situations, cultural references, and familiar topics into lessons helps children connect new vocabulary and language structures to their existing knowledge. Creating a print-rich environment with labeled objects, word walls, can fosters language exploration and vocabulary expansion.

Moreover, Intersubjectivity is a strategy that emphasizes meaningful social interaction and communication in the classroom. Preschool English language learners benefit greatly from opportunities to interact with peers and teachers, as this fosters language practice and development. Collaborative learning activities, such as group projects and role-plays, encourage children to express their thoughts and ideas in English.

Effective strategies for preschool English language learners require a holistic approach that considers scaffolding, continuity, contextual support, and intersubjectivity. By implementing these strategies and providing a supportive learning environment, educators can help preschoolers develop their English language skills and foster a strong foundation for future academic success. If these ideas are adhered to by educators future TOEIC students are likely to increase their scores, and in turn, in the future, it will help Japan to compete in a globalized economy.

## References

1. Barone, D.M. & Xu, S. H. (2008). *Literacy Instruction for English Language Learners Pre-K-2*. New York: The Guilford Press.
2. Brabham, E. G. & Lynch-Brown, C. (2002). Effects of teachers' reading-aloud styles on vocabulary acquisition and comprehension of students in the early elementary grades. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 94(3), 465-473.
3. Deich, R. F. (1972). Color Recognition and Word Frequency. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 85(3), 393-396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1420839>
4. Dockett, S., Einarsdóttir, J. (2017). Continuity and Change as Children Start School. In: Ballam, N., Perry, B., Garpelin, A. (eds) *Pedagogies of Educational Transitions. International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education and Development*, vol 16. Springer, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43118-5\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43118-5_9)
5. Jones, G. M., & Brader-Araje, L. (2002, Spring). *The impact of constructivism on education: Language, discourse, and meaning*. <https://ac-journal.org/journal/vol5/iss3/special/jones.pdf>  
<https://ac-journal.org/journal/vol5/iss3/special/jones.pdf>
6. Lysemamu (2020). Toeic average score by country, Japan ranked 20<sup>th</sup>. *Portal field*. <https://portalfield.com/news/life/1958237>
7. McGee, L. M. & Richgels, D. J. (2003). *Designing early literacy programs: Strategies for at-risk*

- preschool and kindergarten children*. New York: The Guilford Press.
8. Osika, A., MacMahon, S., Lodge, J. M., & Carroll, A. (2022, November 17). *Contextual learning: Linking learning to the real world*. THE Campus Learn, Share, Connect. <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/campus/contextual-learning-linking-learning-real-world>
  9. Pol, J. van de, Volman, M., Oort, F., & Beishuizen, J. (2015, June 5). *The effects of scaffolding in the classroom: Support contingency and student independent working time in relation to student achievement, task effort, and appreciation of support - instructional science*. SpringerLink. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11251-015-9351-z#citeas>
  10. Richards, J., & Rodgers, T. (2014). Total Physical Response. In *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching* (Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, pp. 277-288). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/9781009024532.019
  11. Roell, K. (2020). Average TOEIC Listening and Reading Scores: Sorted by Age, Gender, Country, and Education. *ThoughtCo*. <https://thoughtco.com/average-toeic-scores-by-age-gender-country-and-education-3211524> .
  12. Saracho, O.N. Theories of Child Development and Their Impact on Early Childhood Education and Care. *Early Childhood Educ J* **51**, 15–30 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01271-5>
  13. Spadafora, Natalie & Downes, Taylor. (2020). Scaffolding in Learning. 10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6\_1350-1.
  14. Smyrniotis, Andrianna. (2023). INVESTIGATING INTERSUBJECTIVITY BETWEEN PRESCHOOL TEACHERS AND CHILDREN DURING INSTRUCTION: A CASE STUDY.
  15. Tabors, P. O. (2008). *One child, two languages: A guide for early childhood educators of children learning English as a second language* (2nd ed.). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
  16. Van Lier, L. (2004). *The ecology and semiotics of language learning*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Press. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/1-4020-7912-5>
  17. Wang, Zhenlin & Wang, Lamei. (2015). Cognitive Development: Child Education. International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences. 10.1016/B978-0-08-097086-8.92007-5.
  18. Wood, D. J., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The Role of Tutoring in Problem-Solving. *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology*, *17*, 89-100. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.1976.tb0038>