

Voices from the Field: Using Fun Essay Posters to Foster Beginning Writing Skills for Japanese Elementary School Students

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Teaching Context

- Level: Beginning
- Students: Sixth graders (Nagoya City Public Josai Elementary School)
- Class size: 30 students
- Time: 45 minutes, once or twice a week
- Textbook: *New Horizon Course 6* (Tokyo Shoseki)
 - Unit 3, Let's go to Italy
 - Unit 5, We all live on Earth

Problem

My students were introduced to oral English in grade 3 and written English in grade 5. However, by the time they are in my class in grade 6, they often feel that they do not have enough English to communicate. Also, I observe that some students are outspoken and verbal, some speak out occasionally, and some join class discussions reluctantly. They have challenges in using simple conversation strategies, so they still need to know more strategies to expand their conversations. As the topics get more complicated, they need to think about their ideas after listening to another student's ideas. Some students can change their ideas, and some students add some information to strengthen their reasons. If all students could do this, their learning opportunities would be better. Therefore, I set goals to encourage and enable all students to speak well and, hopefully, also fluently.

Solution

After the textbook's speaking activities, students did a writing activity. They wrote about the topic they had discussed in the textbook exercises. The speaking activity itself is aimed at encouraging students to write more because they can get ideas from other students. They are able to learn from their classmates' ideas and how to express themselves in English. I decided to try poster



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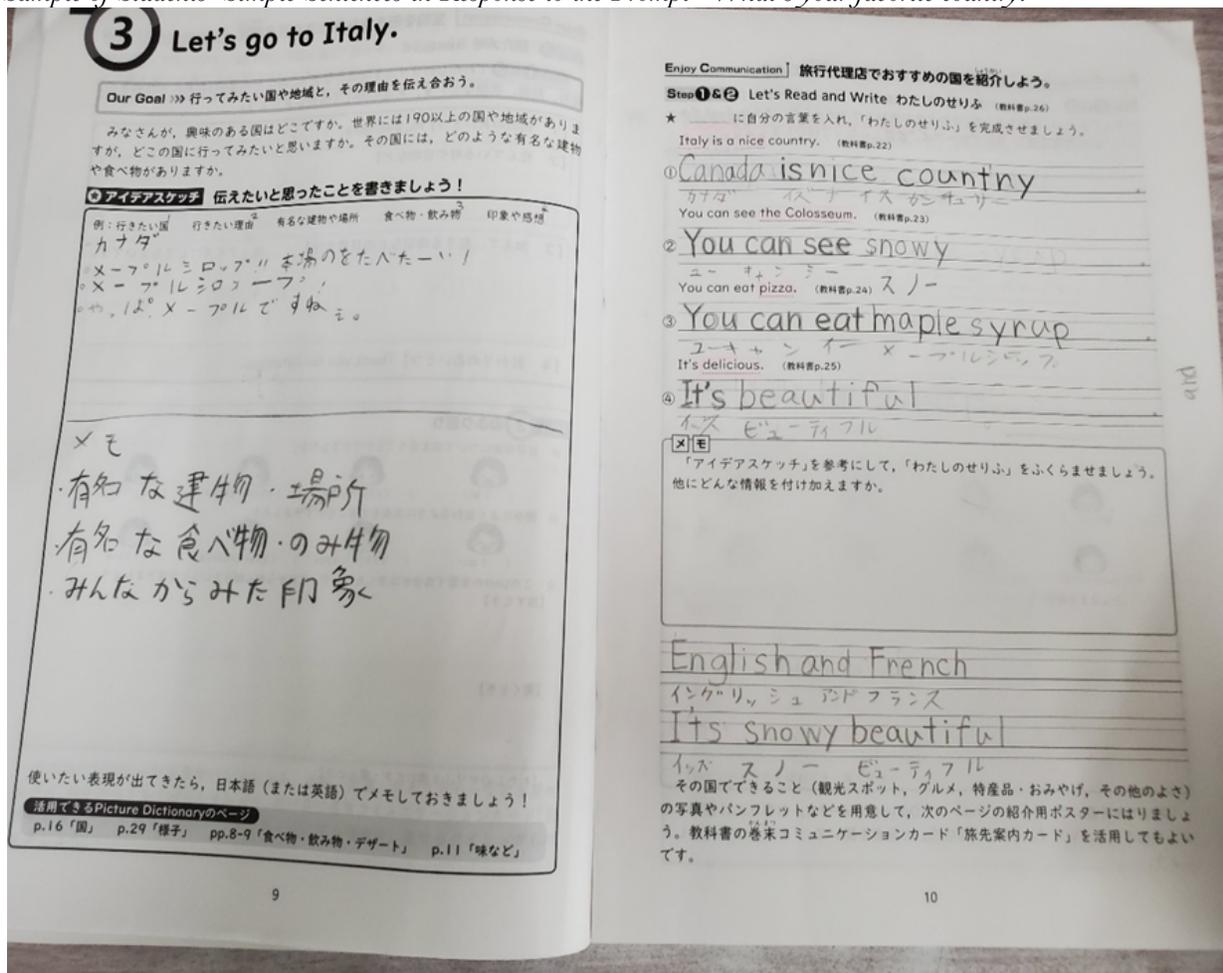
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activities with simple English for communication. The first step is doing pair work using brainstorming and sharing ideas. Then, the students write a few sentences, and in the end, they work in groups of four to create a poster.

The students started brainstorming and writing reasons to support their opinion about topics, such as food chains and favorite countries. They talked in pairs and groups about their writing. Figure 1 shows examples of early drafts of the writing.

Figure 1

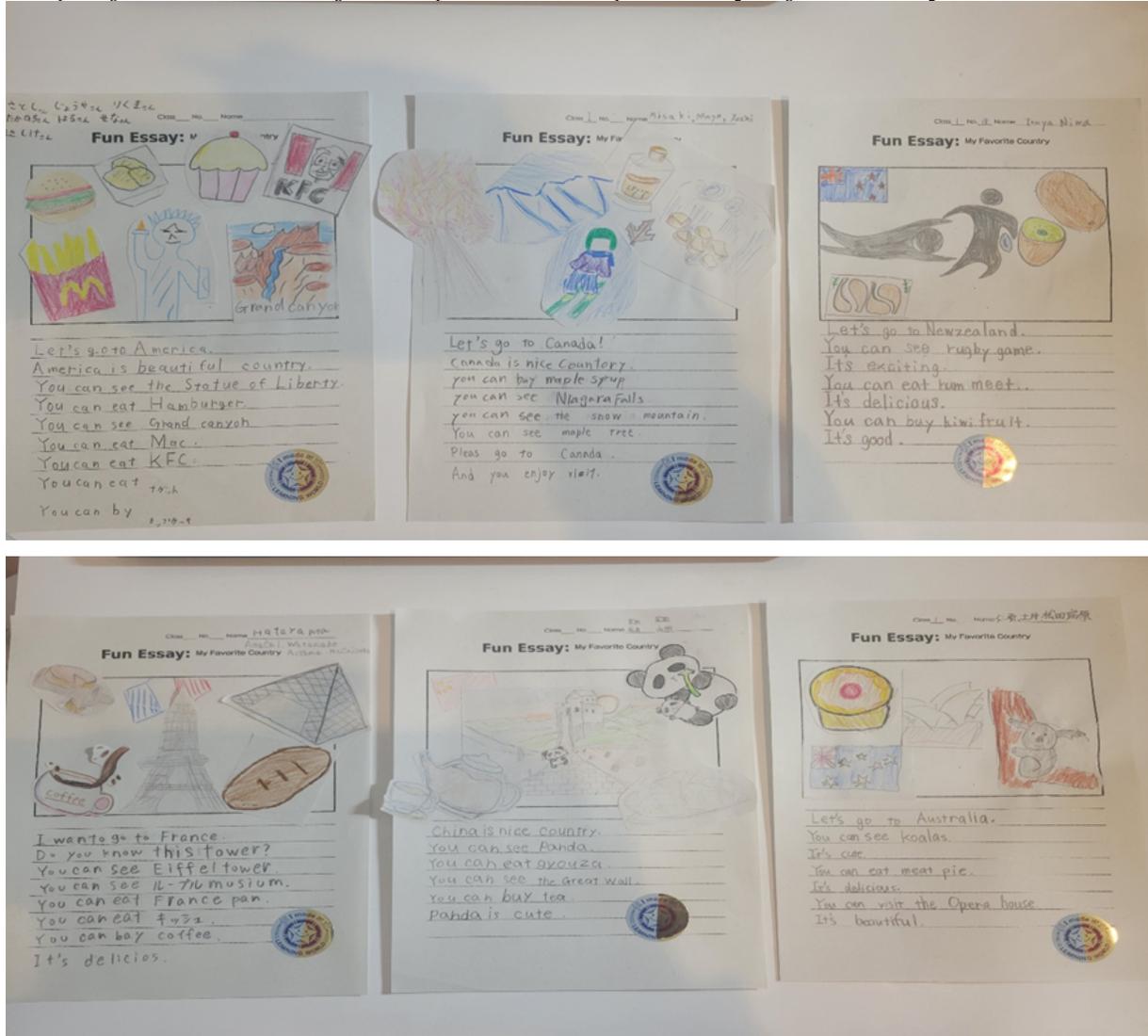
Sample of Students' Simple Sentences in Response to the Prompt "What's your favorite country?"



Students then made a poster draft in a group and presented it to another group. Figure 2 shows examples of my students' poster drafts.

Figure 2

Examples of Students' Poster Drafts in Response to the Prompt "What's your favorite country?"



After presenting their first drafts, students did peer-editing. To give feedback to their classmates, they were prompted to ask for more information on what they did not understand and wanted to know more about. After my students wrote the final draft together, they wrote simple sentences to introduce their topic to the class (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Fun Essay Posters on Classroom Walls: Favorite Countries and Food Chains



Once students revised their writing, they formed groups of four. Each student in the group gave their presentation (see Figure 4). Each speaker was asked three questions and the group members had to continue talking in English until the teacher allowed them to stop. After all the students in a group had finished their presentations, new groups were made, and students gave their speeches again to their new group members. This format helps develop fluency for students.

Figure 4
Students Presenting their Writing Activity



At first, most students were unfamiliar with pair and group activities. They could not communicate with classmates in English and seemed uncomfortable with this new idea. However, I noticed that they appeared comfortable when they tried to join poster activities and

soon enjoyed sharing in English more. They made beautiful posters and wrote in their reflections that it was fun to write about topics such as food chains, and they were also interested in listening to other students' speeches. While writing and speaking on these interesting topics, my students also learned language forms in context (cf. Sato et al., 2012).

Conclusion

I learned that even when students have limited English, with simple tasks supported by group work and visual aids, they can communicate in and engage with English meaningfully. The speaking, writing, and poster activities helped to expand their ideas. According to Lee and VanPatten (2003), teachers should strive to create communicative activities so that “classrooms can become places where learners talk about real things and learn about each other” (p. 72). Although students need more time to compare their ideas with their classmates' ideas, in the end, I believe that these kinds of activities can prepare them for English use in the future.

References

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About the author

Rie Yuzawa is an English elementary school teacher in Japan. She holds an MA in Literature & Education from Gifu Women's University. She started taking several MA TESOL courses at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies in 2022.