The Language Connection

Pro says 'Eigo Noto' can be used flexibly

Midori Matsuzawa / Daily Yomiuri Staff Writer

With an eye on the upcoming revision of the nation's teaching guidelines for primary schools, to be officially implemented in April 2011, the Education, Science and Technology Ministry released in April a trial version of its Eigo Noto (English Notebook) workbooks for use in compulsory English lessons for fifth and sixth graders.

While the workbooks have been distributed to several hundred schools nationwide for trial use, teachers and educators have increasingly become curious about how to use the materials. So when a presentation on the theme was held late last month in Tokyo, officials from many local boards of education flocked to the talk by Ryuta Umemoto, who has offered more than 5,000 English lessons since 1996 at two ministry-designated pilot schools in Kawachi-Nagano, Osaka Prefecture.

Umemoto first worked as a specialized teacher of English at Amano Primary School before being transferred to Tako Primary School in 2006.

Currently, the fifth and sixth graders at the two pilot schools take 50 lessons a year and have tried some units from the workbooks.

Each volume of the Eigo Noto workbooks consists of nine units to be learned over 35 lessons throughout a year--or once a week. They are accompanied by teachers' manuals, which include detailed plans for each lesson to help homeroom teachers offer such lessons together with assistant language teachers.

However, "I'm afraid that you can't teach all 35 lessons just by following the lesson plans without any adjustments," Umemoto said. He believes it would be impossible to finish all the content in the workbooks as suggested in the manuals, and therefore says teachers should not become obsessed about doing so.

To illustrate how one unit is organized in the Eigo Noto workbooks, Umemoto took as an example Lesson 5 from the fifth graders' workbook, which his students were just learning at the time of the presentation.

Focusing on the names of clothing and colors, Lesson 5 starts with a listening exercise that involves looking at a picture of people wearing several kinds of clothes, including some ethnic costumes. It is followed by a chanting exercise in which the children sing the target vocabulary, and an activity using picture cards on which children add their own favorite colors and designs.

These cards are then used in a shopping game, before the unit ends with a show-and-tell session covering what the children bought while shopping.

Umemoto pointed out that teachers may be able to follow the first few tasks given in each unit, but should be flexible depending on how their students are learning.

"What you'll probably have to adjust the most is the last activity of the unit," he said. "You should adjust the final goal in accordance with [the needs of] your own students, based on which you can add games and expressions if necessary.

"Ultimately, you should create a final activity that allows every student to feel a sense of achievement--that's the basic principle."

Umemoto's school modified the final show-and-tell session by holding a "fashion show," for which the students collected real clothes from their homes, while also learning more names of items they wanted to wear in addition to those given in Eigo Noto.

Tako's version of the shopping game also added the role of models, who dispatched their "shoppers" to get their favorite items. For this activity, expressions such as "May I help you?" and "How much?" were added, although the workbook does not require students to go through the motions of paying money.

The upcoming revision will make English compulsory but not a regular subject, which requires materials to go through the regular textbook authorization process. Therefore, the Eigo Noto workbooks are not official textbooks, and schools can decide not to use them.

Umemoto regards the workbooks as a "minimum level" that presents "a basic idea on what primary school English is supposed to be like."

Therefore, "Teachers can arrange on their own to offer similar content," he said.

Although the upcoming revision will officially take effect in three years, a transitional period will start in the new school year beginning April 2009, during which the ministry expects that most schools will get a head start in offering English lessons.

Therefore, the ministry plans to distribute the complete version of the Eigo Noto workbooks by the end of this school year after partially modifying the trial version.

Meanwhile, the ministry has also been producing a software version of the workbooks that combines the content of the books and their accompanying CDs. To be used with computers or e-boards (electric white boards), the teaching aid is expected to be distributed by the end of the current school year--like Eigo Noto itself.

Umemoto understands that most primary school teachers feel more and more anxious toward the start of the transitional period next year. However, he stressed that they should not feel too rushed, referring to the saying, "The shortest way round is the longest way home."

"The shortest way is usually full of dangers that allow only a limited number of people to go through it," he said. "We should take the correct route, and it's absolutely necessary to get all the teachers involved in this issue, because English has now been positioned as part of the school curriculum."
Though this may look like a "roundabout path," Umemoto called for teachers to gather necessary information and try various methods while discussing them with their colleagues--just as teachers do for their other subjects.

'Noto' shortcomings can be overcome, expert says

Eigo Noto (English Notebook) workbooks are designed to help children become interested in language and culture. Topics include saying hello in various languages and different writing systems, as well as foods and ethnic costumes from around the world.

As a trainer for teachers of English for children, Keiko Abe-Ford appreciates this aspect about the workbooks. Abe-Ford, who has been invited by a number of primary schools to teach English to students and train teachers, runs a teacher-training company in Tokyo that is currently holding workshops on how to use the materials.

However, the Eigo Noto workbooks may be too confusing or complicated for many teachers, as the books "don't always take a step-by-step approach," Abe-Ford said during a recent interview with The Daily Yomiuri.

For example, Lesson 4 in the fifth-grade workbook focuses on the pattern "Do you like...?" The problem is, she said, the unit presents items by mixing countable and uncountable nouns--like bananas, ice cream and swimming.

"When introducing such basics to kids, they should practice countable nouns first, and then uncountable ones," she said. "By doing this, teachers can feel confident about what they're doing."

Moreover, Abe-Ford called some of the workbooks' activities a little immature for fifth and sixth graders. Therefore, she urged teachers to provide them with something that can stimulate their intellectual curiosity.

Abe-Ford suggested one possible example using the contents of Lesson 5 from the fifth graders' workbook. The unit focuses on the names of colors and articles of clothing and is accompanied by cards bearing line drawings at the end of the book.

Abe-Ford's idea goes like this: After learning the target vocabulary as a group, students are asked to turn around with their hands behind their backs. A teacher then places the cards in their hands.

The game requires the children to guess what is drawn on the cards they have been given by showing them to their classmates and asking, for example, "Do I have a cap?" until they get a "yes."

In the second round, the teacher gives the children the same cards, this time giving them a color, so that they have to ask, "Do I have a yellow cap?" In the third round, the cards are given an additional color and the students then have to be careful about the sequence: They must place the
"Do I have a blue and yellow cap?"

"To improve language, students only have to repeat the target expressions," Abe-Ford said. "They don't care how they have to repeat the phrase if they're given tasks that are challenging and stimulate their curiosity."

Abe-Ford stressed that primary school teachers should be allowed to attend workshops on how to take such a step-by-step approach to the workbooks. As long as they have ideas to work with, they are capable of designing English lessons on their own, she said.

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