

Teaching Fluency in Primary School English Class

Fumiko YAMAZAKI* and Kunihiro NAGASAWA**

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Abstract

This paper explores the possibility of teaching fast and natural speech of English to Japanese primary school students. This question is examined from three points of view: 1) to what extent is it possible to teach fast and natural speech to primary school students? 2) what kinds of teaching materials are needed to achieve this end? 3) what kind of teaching method should be used for this purpose? In order to answer these questions, three activities were designed and implemented for sixth-graders (eleven- to twelve-year-olds). Analyses of the videotaped lessons and the teacher's field notes show that 1) fluency can be taught if we adjust the difficulty level of the materials and the related tasks, 2) students can be fluent in patterned drills, and 3) not only authentic materials but also teacher-made materials are effective for teaching fluency.

Introduction

This paper explores the possibility of teaching fast and natural speech of English to Japanese primary school students. The traditional view of teaching English pronunciation in Japan is what may be called a “bottom-up” approach, which starts with teaching segmentals and then moves to teaching supra-segmentals. This view tells us, “accuracy first and then fluency.” According to the view, therefore, it seems to be taken for granted that beginner learners like primary school students should acquire accurate pronunciation first. Recent research in phonology, however, casts doubt on the value of analysing speech sounds in isolation and claims that they should be taught as connected speech in discourse, thus stressing a “top-down” approach.

Since the current view of English teaching in Japan, as is expressed in the Education Ministry's Course of Study, focuses on communication rather than phonological accuracy and grammatical correctness, teaching fluency will be a plausible objective in primary school English language education. This paper tries to clarify 1) to what extent it is possible to teach fast and natural speech to primary school students, 2) what kinds of teaching materials are needed to achieve this end, and 3) what kind of teaching method should be used for this purpose. In order to examine these questions, three activities were designed and implemented for sixth-graders (eleven- to twelve-year-olds). They were given to the students in the order of increasing difficulty of the texts and the tasks involved. All the lessons are videotaped for later analyses.

The paper is divided into three sections. Section 1 gives a review of the discussion of the “bottom-up”/ “top-down” dichotomy and tries to provide a rationale for teaching fluency to primary school students. Section 2 describes the procedures of the lessons that were imple-

*Meijigakuen Primary School (5-1, Sensuicho, Tobataku, Kitakyushushi 804-8558 Japan).

**English Language Teaching, Faculty of Education, Ibaraki University, Mito 310-8512 Japan.

mented. The final section discusses and evaluates the results of the lessons.

1 Accuracy/fluency dichotomy

There are two different views of the way we incorporate phonological features of natural speech of English into educational contexts. Roach (1991: 127), while admitting features of natural connected speech, holds that we can disregard them, and goes on to argue that “producing elisions is something which foreign learners do not need to learn to do.” Mendelsohn (1994: 70) sees the problem from a different viewpoint and claims that “fast speech is the norm for spoken English.” Cauldwell and Allen (1997) echo this view, arguing that learners must practise fast speech because it will be a good preparation for listening to fast and natural speech and enable them to speak fast when necessary.

Traditionally, the teaching of English pronunciation in Japanese secondary schools has placed greater emphasis on the accuracy of pronunciation at phonemic level than on features of connected speech. The shift of emphasis in the current Course of Study from the teaching of sentences to that of discourses, from grammar-gearred teaching to communication-oriented teaching, seems to provide a rationale for teaching fluency in our secondary school English classrooms. In the same context, teaching fluency will be appropriate in primary school English language education. The Japanese Ministry of Education recently has set the “period for integrated study” (or comprehensive study) for the primary school curriculum, where we can teach “English conversation” as part of “international understanding education.” The integrated study period aims to provide students occasions for trial and error in their learning process. It is part of an on-going educational reform the aim of which is to shift the focus of learning from segmental knowledge to integrated knowledge. The new direction suggested in English language education is also on the same track, which stresses the importance of learning English for communication rather than learning separate knowledge about the English language. With this situation in mind, one can suggest the following three advantages of teaching fast and natural English to primary school students.

The first advantage of teaching fluency is that we can give our students an overall picture of the English sound system, not through explicit and analytical explanations of it but through consciousness-raising. That is, instead of explaining phonetic rules to students and drilling them in pronunciation through a bottom-up approach, we can raise their consciousness for English sounds through carefully designed activities that allow students to develop their awareness of English phonetic rules and/or acquire English pronunciation.

Secondly, fast and natural speech can be sought in what is called “authentic materials” or, to use Johnson’s (1998: 24) term, “genuine instances of language use.” As the majority of English language teachers in Japan are non-native speakers of English, we have to seek samples of natural speech in such realia. One great benefit of using authentic materials, as we will see in section 3.1, is that students welcome and enjoy such materials because they can hear “real” English. The authenticity of materials can be a great motivating factor in language learning because, as White (1998: 89) puts it, they give learners “information about current world events and the target culture and put them in touch with the world outside.”

Thirdly, emphases on fluency and overall effect of communication rather than on discrete-

point accuracy of grammar and pronunciation, will reduce the sense of inhibition Japanese learners have when they speak English. This will counterbalance the overemphasis laid on accuracy in the teaching and learning of English in secondary school English classrooms.

2 Lesson procedures

2.1 Teaching situations

A series of activities that are described in this section were implemented for three sixth-grade classes (eleven- to twelve-year-olds) of the private primary school where Yamazaki is teaching. The same activities were used in each class. The classes had an average of 40 students equally divided between boys and girls. The students meet two times a week, each class being 40 minutes long. The English classes they had in the lower grades were conducted almost entirely in English. Eighty-five percent of the target students have been exposed to authentic English outside the classroom and 76 percent of them have enjoyed bilingual TV programmes or English pop music. The only authentic materials to which students were exposed in class before they became sixth-graders were songs. One English song was taught every month.

2.2 Teaching materials

To sensitise students to fast and natural English speech, three activities were used in seven lessons. The first activity, which was done in lessons 1 and 2, made use of a pop song. The song was chosen because of the appropriateness of its theme (i.e., friendship) and the difficulty level of the vocabulary used in it. In Activity 2 (for lessons 3 and 4), a listening quiz was used. Two native speakers of English recorded it. The rate of speaking was modified so as to suit the students' listening ability. In Activity 3 (for lessons 5 to 7), students watched a two-minute extract of a TV drama on video. The drama was chosen out of several candidates because the story line was very clear and the main character was a boy of the same age as the students. These activities were sequenced in the order of increasing difficulty of the materials and the tasks involved, based on Rost's (1991: 10) "main techniques of adjusting the 'level' of an activity." All the lessons were videotaped for later analyses.

2.3 Lesson procedures

The followings are the lesson procedures of Activities 1 to 3. The work sheets used for them are given in Appendices.

2.3.1 Activity 1

[Lesson 1]

Pre-activity: Students listen to a pop song on a CD. After the listening, the teacher tells them the title of the song and explains that it is a song about making friends.

Main activity: Students do work sheet A (see Appendix 1) while the teacher plays the CD twice. Then they check the answers through group work. Each group reports its answers to the whole class, which the teacher writes on the chalkboard.

Post-activity: Students listen to the CD with the help of work sheet B, which has the full text accompanied by a Japanese translation (see Appendix 2).

[Lesson 2]

Pre-activity: Students listen to the CD once.

Main activity: Students listen to the CD, paying attention to the words written in a larger font in work sheet C (Appendix 3) that are pronounced prominently. The teacher writes difficult words on the chalkboard and gets students to read them after her. Students read the text of the song by tone units¹⁾ while putting slashes where the teacher stops. They read the text by lines after the teacher repeatedly. The teacher explains and demonstrates how to pronounce unstressed words. Students sing the song to a metronome at a variety of tempos from *largo* to *allegro*.

Post-activity: Students sing the song simultaneously with the CD.

2.3.2 Activity 2

[Lesson 3]

Pre-activity: Students review the names of animals using a picture dictionary. The teacher tells them that she will give a quiz about animals.

Main activity: After listening to Tape A (the script is given in Appendix 4a), students guess the answers through group discussion. Each group reports its answers to the class, which the teacher writes on the chalkboard. The teacher gives out work sheet D (Appendix 5) and explains the purpose of the activity. Students listen to Tape A and try to fill in the brackets individually before they discuss the answers in groups. They do this activity twice. Each group reports its answers by turns, which the teacher writes on the chalkboard. Students discuss the answers of the other groups and report the result of the group discussion to the class. Students listen to Tape B (see Appendix 4b for the script) and know the correct answer.

Post-activity: Students talk about “tigers.”

[Lesson 4]

Pre-activity: Students listen to Tape A to nudge their memory.

Main activity: The teacher gives out work sheet E (Appendix 6). She writes difficult words on the chalkboard and gets students to read them after her. While listening to Tape A twice, students pay attention to the words in a larger font. The teacher reads only these words and asks students whether they can get a clue for the quiz. Then she reads each sentence very slowly with students so that they can confirm the pronunciation of the words in citation form. She reads the sentences highlighting the emphasised words and gets students to repeat after her. She also explains how to pronounce non-prominent words. Students listen to Tape A and compare sentences spoken naturally and ones read word by word. Students do this activity with all the sentences using work sheet E. The teacher plays Tape A and stops after each sentence for students to repeat it. Students choose any one of the sentences and read it fluently to the class.

Post-activity: Students fluently read the whole text in work sheet E and listen to Tape A once.

2.3.3 Activity 3

[Lesson 5]

Pre-activity: The teacher tells students they are going to see a TV drama in which the main

character is a boy who is almost the same age as them. She asks them what they normally do and normally should not do as primary school students.

Main activity: Students watch the drama on video and write down in work sheet F (Appendix 7) all the words/phrases/expressions that they heard. They discuss the results in groups. Each group reports to the whole class the results of the group discussion, which the teacher writes on the chalkboard and reads with students. Students do these activities twice. Then they watch the video and guess what is happening, think about the story, and write down their ideas in the work sheet.

Post-activity: Students see the video in a Japanese version so that they can check whether their guess is right or wrong. Then they see the video in the English version and reflect if their understanding improved after seeing the Japanese version.

[Lesson 6]

Pre-activity: Students watch the video once.

Main activity: The teacher gives out work sheet G (Appendix 8). Students listen to the audiotape of the drama and try to answer by whom and in what scene the utterances on the work sheet are made. They listen to the audiotape with their attention on the words in a larger font on the work sheet. Then they read the sentences clearly word by word with the teacher twice before they pronounce the emphasised words after the teacher. After the teacher's explanation of how to pronounce unstressed words, students read those unstressed words in the work sheet after the tape. Students listen to the unstressed pronunciation they practised on the tape. The teacher plays the soundtrack of the video and checks students' listening comprehension of the sentences they practised. Students do this twice. Then they choose any one of the sentences and read it. Before moving on to the second activity in work sheet G, students read words/phrases/sentences after the teacher twice and make sure what they are going to listen to. Finally, they listen to the audiotape and see the videotape, and circle the words they could hear.

Post-activity: Students watch the video without stopping so that they can review what they have learned.

[Lesson 7]

Main activity: Students watch the whole story on video.

3 Discussion

This section discusses the three issues that we have raised in the Introduction: 1) to what extent is it possible to teach fluency to primary school students? 2) what kinds of teaching materials are needed for this end? 3) what kind of teaching method should be used for this purpose?

3.1 Possibility of teaching fluency

The first question can be answered from three points of view: students' achievements on the work sheets, the teacher's observations in the classroom, and the students' responses to the

questionnaire survey that was administered after each activity.

The students' answers in work sheets A, D, and G show that 80 to 90 % of them understood the "fast" speech of the listening texts. The focus of listening in Activities 1 and 3 was placed on phrases and that in Activity 2 was on sentences. But actually, in Activities 1 and 3, students were required to listen to phrases in discourse, not ones pronounced in isolation, which made the listening more difficult.

Students' fluency in speaking can not be testified from the work sheets but was observed by the teacher. In Activity 1, students soon got used to assimilation as in "what we wanna do" or "where we wanna go" and enjoyed practising the phrases. Also, they managed to sing the song at allegro, one of the faster tempos in music. In Activity 2, it was observed that students understood the difference between stressed words and unstressed words and, at the end of the second lesson, read the sentences fluently with proper stress. In Activity 3, learning assimilation and linking in "forget your" and "keep it down", students found the sounds funny and enjoyed practising the phrases. As they got used to fast speech, their voices became louder and they seemed to be more and more confident. We have to admit, however, that students' fluency in speaking was achieved in patterned drills or recitation, not in spontaneous interactions.

Yamazaki administered the following questionnaire survey after each activity.

- 1) Is this tape/video appropriate for the class?
- 2) Do you think the activities were helpful for you to practise listening?
- 3) Do you think the activities were helpful for you to practise speaking fluently?
- 4) Do you want to do activities using authentic/natural materials again?

The three kinds of questionnaire were administered for the three classes respectively. The students' answers to these questions were very positive. More than 75 % of the students answered "Yes, very much" or "Yes" to the questions. To the question about the use of authentic materials (4) above), 40 out of 41 students answered either "Yes, very much" or "Yes". In the column for writing comments, many students expressed their surprise when they first heard natural speech, but at the same time they admitted that the exercises were great fun and worth doing.

From these three points, we can say that it is possible and desirable to teach fast speech to primary school students.

3. 2 Teaching materials

In order to expose students to fast and natural English, two kinds of materials were used: authentic materials and teacher-made materials. These materials were given to the students in the order of increasing difficulty of their contents and the tasks involved. The average speaking rate of the pop song (authentic material) for Activity 1 was 1.9 words per second; that of the listening quiz (teacher-made material) for Activity 2 was 1.9 words per second; that of the drama (authentic material) for Activity 3 was 2.8 words per second. Altenberg (1987: 22) ranks natural English speech from the fastest (conversation, 3.7 words per second) to the slowest (popular lecture, 1.7 words per second). From this respect, our first two materials can be categorised as the slowest and the third material can be regarded relatively fast speech. Considering that the period of implementation was short and that the students' listening ability is rather low, the authors felt that materials of moderate speed were needed for the earlier stage of implementation.

When the students heard the pop song (Activity 1) for the first time, most of them were astonished by the fast rate of speaking (singing). But as it was a song, i.e., as it had an element of enjoyment, students soon got used to the material. The second material (a listening quiz) was contrived by teachers. Two native speakers of English recorded it and Yamazaki designed the task in cooperation with them. She found that task-design for the contrived material was easier than when dealing with authentic materials. In contrived materials, one can adjust the speaking rate and the difficulty level of the task to the ability of one's students. Also, in contrived materials, the speakers can change their speaking rate freely according to the purpose of the tasks, while it is difficult to find authentic materials that have an appropriate variety of speaking rates which would suit to the teacher's needs.

The speaking rate in the third material (a TV drama) is closest to the "fast and natural" English in Altenberg's (1987) classification. It was anticipated that students would not be able to understand it. But most of them achieved the task more or less successfully. For example, when the teacher asked who said particular lines in the drama, students gave correct answers in English or Japanese. Also, in doing task 2 of work sheet G, 28 students understood all the 14 items, and 9 students got 10 and more items correct. The high rate of the success, it was estimated, was due to the nature of the task. That is, Yamazaki did not ask students to understand all the text, but part of it.

From the discussion above, we may safely conclude that if we adjust the difficulty level of teaching materials and the related tasks, authentic or simulated materials spoken at a fast and natural speech rate can be used for primary school students. Another finding of this research is that teacher-made materials worked well. A good mixture of authentic materials and contrived materials will be advisable.

3.3 Teaching method

As far as the teaching method is concerned, two problems remain to be resolved. The first problem is that we did not provide our students opportunities to practise fast and natural speech in communicative situations. The basic strategy we took for teaching fluency was to get them to listen to authentic/simulated materials and drill them in reciting them after the teacher or tape. Students learned some features of connected speech in English like linking, elision, and assimilation, and they more or less successfully understood connected speech spoken at fast and natural speed and even were able to recite it in the same way. But we are not sure if they can "speak" in that way in spontaneous interactions because we did not provide them with such situations. If our students are to be "fluent" in the normal sense of the word, they should be fluent not only in reciting but also in speaking.

The second problem is that we did not provide our students abundant opportunities in which they can be sensitised to and acquire English speech sounds through consciousness-raising. One example that could have been improved is the exercise for assimilation in Activity 1. We gave the students two different texts: the text in work sheet B that has "wanna" for "want to" and that in work sheet C that has "want to". One idea might have been that we give only one text "want to" and allow students to notice the "difference" between the spelling and its pronunciation.

The same technique can be applied to the learning of classroom-English expressions like "Thank you." "Would you say it again?" "Could you speak more slowly, please?" Students

understand and say these expressions as part of classroom English without knowing how to spell them out. After students get used to these expressions, the teacher can show the sentences to see what they can learn about the relationships between English spellings and their sounds.

Conclusion

After an experiment of teaching fast and natural speech to primary school sixth-graders in seven lessons, we have reached the following conclusions. First, it is possible to teach fluency to primary school students. They understood connected speech in discourse and managed to produce fast speech with the use of elision, linking, and assimilation. Second, not only authentic materials but also contrived materials were found effective in the teaching of fluency. It is advisable for the teacher to use authentic and contrived materials according to the purpose of the tasks involved. Third, we were successful in teaching fluency when our students performed in patterned drills or listening. However, since we did not provide them with situations for spontaneous interactions, we could not discover if they can be fluent in such situations. If we are to develop students' "fluency" in the proper sense of the term, we should provide them with situations where they can practise and develop fluency in spontaneous communication.

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Note

- 1) The term "tone unit" is used in the sense that Brazil (1994) defines it. The authors found the idea very illuminating when they tried to teach the primary students English rhythm and intonation.

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Appendix 1: Work sheet A

6th grade

3rd term

class _____ name _____

LET'S BE FRIENDS

Well hello hello and how are you

How 1. _____ you do

Can I be friends with you

It's a real 2. _____ day to 3. _____ together

In any weather

In the sunshine or the 4. _____We can 5. _____ what we wanna doCome on let's sing a 6. _____We can 7. _____ where 8. _____ wanna goCome on let's 9. _____ alongWell hello 10. _____ and 11. _____ are 12. _____13. _____ 14. _____ 15. _____ 16. _____Can I 17. _____ 18. _____ 19. _____ youIt's a real good 20. _____ to get together

In any weather

In the 21. _____ or 22. _____ rainWe can do 23. _____ we wanna doCome on it's time 24. _____ playWe 25. _____ 26. _____ where we 27. _____ goCome on 28. _____ fly 29. _____

So much to show you

I'd like to 30. _____ youI really think we'll be 31. _____ 32. _____ of friends

In any weather

Let's get together

33. _____ on let's get together let's be 34. _____Real 35. _____, good friends, 36. _____ friends

Appendix 2: Work sheet B

6th grade

3rd term

class _____ name _____

LET'S BE FRIENDS

Well hello hello and how are you

How do you do

Can I be friends with you

It's a real good day to get together

In any weather

In the sunshine or the rain

レッツ・ビー・フレンズ

ハロー、ハロー げんきかい
 はじめまして
 きみともだちになりたいんだ
 いっしょにすごすにはうってつけの日さ
 どんてんきでも
 はれでも、あめがふってても

We can do what we want to do

Come on let's sing a song

We can go where we want to go

Come on let's walk along

やりたいことなんでもやろうよ
 さあ、うたをうたおう
 いきたいところについてみようよ
 さあ、いっしょにあるこう

Well hello hello and how are you

How do you do

Can I be friends with you

It's a real good day to get together

In any weather

In the sunshine or the rain

ハロー、ハロー げんきかい
 はじめまして
 きみともだちになりたいんだ
 いっしょにすごすにはうってつけの日さ
 どんてんきでも
 はれでも、あめがふってても

やりたいことなんでもやろうよ
 さあ、あそびのじかんだ
 いきたいところについてみようよ
 さあ、つばきをひろげるとびたとう

We can do what we want to do

Come on it's time to play

We can go where we want to go

Come on let's fly away

きみにみせたいものが山ほどあるし
 きみのこともっとしりたいんだ
 ほくたちきつといいともだちになれる
 てんきがどうだってかまわない
 いっしょにあそぼう
 さあ、みんなあつまろう
 ともだちになろう

ほんとうのともだちに
 いいともだちに
 さいこうのともだちに

So much to show you

I'd like to know you

I really think we'll be the best of friends

In any weather

Let's get together

Come on let's get together let's be friends

Real friends, good friends, best friends

(red) - 14



Appendix 3: Work sheet C

6th grade

3rd term

class _____ name _____

LET'S BE FRIENDS-3

*A) Well hello hello and how are you

How do YOU do

Can I be friends with you

It's a real good day to get together

In any weather

In the sunshine or the rain

*B) We can do what we wanna do

Come on let's sing a song

We can GO where we wanna GO

Come ON let's walk along

*A) REPEAT

*C) We can do what we wanna do

Come on it's time to play

We CAN go where we wanna go

Come ON let's fly away



*D) So much to show you

I'd like to know you

I really think we'll be the best of friends

In any weather

Let's get together

Come on let's get together let's be friends

Real friends, good friends, best friends

Appendix 4a: Script for Tape A

I have a quiz for you. See if you can guess what kind of animal I'm talking about. These are big cats of the forest country. They eat large animals such as wild pigs, buffalo, and deer. They live in China, India, Siberia, and Indonesia. They have long tails about 60-90 centimeters long. The head and body is about 140 centimeters long. And they are heavy, too. They weigh about 180-360 kilograms. They're active at twilight or at night. They have a very good sense of hearing. They're good swimmers and they climb very well, too. What is the name of this animal?

Appendix 4b: Script for Tape B

I'm going to give you a quiz. Please listen carefully to the clues and try to guess the answer. They're big cats of the forest country. They live in India, China, Siberia, and Indonesia. They have long tails. The tails are about 60-90 centimeters long. The head and body is about 140-280 centimeters long. They're heavy, too. They weigh about 180-360 kilograms. They're active at twilight or at night. They have a very good sense of hearing. They're good swimmers and they climb very well, too. They eat large animals such as wild pigs, buffalo, and deer. What is this animal? It's a tiger.

Appendix 5: Work sheet D

6th grade

3rd term Class _____ name _____

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Quiz-2



☆1: Listen to the tape and fill in the blanks.

Questions	Answers
What kind of animals do they eat? (何を食べている?)	wild pigs, (① _____), deer
Where do they live? (どこに住んでいる?)	(② _____) (③ _____) Siberia <シベリア> Indonesia
How long are their tails? (尻尾の長さは?)	60 to (④ _____) centimeters
How long is the head and body? (体長はどのくらい?)	(⑤ _____) centimeters
How much do they weigh? (体重はどのくらい?)	180 to (⑥ _____) kilograms
When are they active? (活動的になるのはいつ?)	at twilight or at (⑦ _____)
Can they hear very well?	⑧ Yes ・ No
Can they swim very well?	⑨ Yes ・ No
Can they climb very well?	⑩ Yes ・ No

What is the name of this animal? It's a/an _____ .

☆2: Tell the class more information about this animal.

Appendix 6: Work sheet E

6th grade

3rd term Class _____ name _____

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Quiz-2-2

- ☆1: Read the large words/phrases.
 ☆2: Listen to the tape and check if you hear the large words/phrases.
 ☆3: Listen to the tape and repeat after it.
 ☆4: Choose one sentence below other than 1, 8, or 13 and read it in a loud voice.

1. I have a quiz for you.
2. See if you can guess what kind of animal I'm talking about.
3. These are big cats of the forest country.
4. They eat large animals such as wild pigs, buffalo, and deer.
5. They live in China, India, Siberia, and Indonesia.
6. They have long tails about 60-90 centimeters long.
7. The head and body is about 140 centimeters long.
8. And they're heavy, too.
9. They weigh about 180-360 kilograms.
10. They're active at twilight or at night.
11. They have a very good sense of hearing.
12. They're good swimmers and they climb very well, too.
13. What is the name of this animal?

Appendix 7: Work sheet F

6th grade

3rd term Class _____ name _____

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Goosebumps-1

☆1: Talk about “What you must do” and “What you must not do” because you are eleven/twelve years old.

☆2: Write down every word/phrase/expression you hear in the video. (By yourself/With friends)

midget, attic,

☆3: Talk about the video.

☆4: Try to guess the story.

(どんな場面ですか？日本語で書きましょう。)

☆5: Answer this question: Do you think that watching the video in Japanese was helpful in understanding the video in English?

(Yes, I think so. / No, I don't think so.)

Appendix 8: Work sheet G

6th grade

3rd term Class _____ name _____

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Goosebumps-2

☆1: Practice these sentences. (audio tape)

1. Pam: Because YOU're a midget!
Matt: NO one asked you!
2. Mother: Oh, Greg, don't forget your coat.
3. Pam: Please keep it down.
4. Mother: Where did you get that idea?

☆2: Listen carefully and circle the words/phrases/sentences which you can catch. (audio tape/video tape)

- [1] "All right!" ten o'clock
- [2] school night, seventeen, "I'm fine."
"Oh, please!"
- [3] "What?" three years, "It's a zoo around here."
- [4] "I'm in a hurry." more privacy, I said, "No!"
- [5] That's reality, Matt. I'm not glad.