

The Effects of Classroom Oral Reading on Adolescent Japanese EFL Learners' Grammatical Proficiency

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Abstract

This is a quasi-experimental study carried out in three sets of two school years at a private junior high school in Tokyo. It investigates the effects of classroom oral reading on Japanese junior high school EFL learners' grammatical proficiency. The participants were three cohorts of students at the school, who were admitted to their school at the beginning of three consecutive academic years respectively. The cohorts were taught the same set of grammar items, but one cohort did oral reading in almost every lesson. The results seem to suggest that while oral reading was effective in learning basic items, it was not as effective in relatively complex ones.

Keywords

Grammar Teaching, Young Learners, Oral Reading

1 Introduction

1.1 Ideals of Japanese School ELT

In Japan, the overall policy of foreign language education in secondary school is outlined in the *Course of Study* by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). This is an official document specifying the content of each school subject and its textbooks. "This official document presents an instructional framework that includes general course objectives, course descriptions and contents to be taught, and guidelines for selecting materials, and is as much a political as a practical statement" (McGroarty and Taguchi, 2005: 211). Looking at the wording of the 2008 *Course of Study*, it seems to be learners' communication skills that the government expect to be developed, i.e., the aim of the overall governmental policy of secondary school English courses stated in the 2008 *Course of Study* is "to foster a positive attitude to attempt communication; and to develop basic communication abilities in listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (MEXT, 2008).

This definition of objectives in the *Course of Study* is considered to be identical to the general view of most Second Language Acquisition /Foreign Language Acquisition (SLA/FLA) professionals. That is, the purpose of foreign language education should be to develop communicative ability by the learner in the target foreign language. The main target language, which is the obligatory foreign language, is English. Now that English has become the main global language (Crystal, 1997), it is quite natural that the acquisition of communicative ability in English should be the main purpose of English language education.

Yano (1999) shows that it is commonly accepted among many SLA/FLA professionals that learning a foreign language means not only learning the language itself but also learning how to communicate with its speakers in socio-culturally appropriate ways. In other words, SLA/FLA learners should develop communicative competence in their target language. Yano (1999) also points out that the notion of communicative competence was first proposed by Hymes as a broader notion of Chomsky's linguistic competence theory; however, the notion of communicative competence proposed by Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei and Thurrell (1995) seems to be the most plausible to date. The model of communicative competence is composed of five subcategories: linguistic, sociocultural, actual, discourse, and strategic competence.

For the development of communicative competence, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) seems to be the most plausible to be applied. Williams (1995) asserts that CLT is considered to be the current mainstream in ESL, which has always been true since then. CLT, one of the methods of the Communicative Approach (CA), directs learners' attention mainly to the meaning of the target language rather than its mechanisms, but it never neglects the importance of grammar. In CLT, the instruction of grammar manifests itself as "Focus on Form." This is a view of grammar in which the primary focus is on meaning or

communication (Long, 1991; Doughty and Williams, 1998). Celce-Murcia (1991) points out that grammar should no longer be the center of language teaching or an autonomous system to be taught and learned independent of meaning, social function, or discourse. Rather, she says, grammar should be taught as one component of a general suite of communicative competence methods.

1.2 The Real Situation of Japanese School ELT

The extent to which the ideals of MEXT are materialized varies considerably with the school. While there are schools which basically follow the *Course of Study*, there are schools which do not.

In Japan, oral reading as a method of English language teaching and learning has come into fashion since around the year 2000 (Kobayashi, 2006). It has been reported as an effective way to strengthen not only learners' awareness of the phonological aspects of English, such as sound-symbol relationships, rhythms, intonations, stresses, the linking of English sound (Izumi, 2009). It is also thought beneficial for learners' speaking skills when it is done repeatedly (Kunihiro, 1998).

On the other hand, there are schools where the *Course of Study* is not followed as faithfully. Teachers at some Japanese secondary schools are finding communicative teaching difficult to implement because of their teaching context. Sakui (2004) did a two-year longitudinal study by interviewing twelve junior high and high school English teachers and observing classes taught by three of them. She reports that Japanese secondary teachers of English are finding it too demanding to manage a communicative lesson, and that they are having difficulties in sparing enough time for preparing a lesson involving communicative activities. As a result, although teachers recognize the importance of developing English communicative competence of their learners, they opt to conduct their lessons in a so-called grammar-translation style, employing a teacher-centered method with explicit grammar instructions and mechanical drills (Sakui, 2004).

Moreover, it seems that the actual purpose of English language education in each school can differ remarkably depending on the needs of that particular institution. In other words, each school has its own purpose for teaching English. This is not to imply that a completely chaotic system reigns, as high schools may be grouped according to the purpose of English education related to its overall educational focus: commercial, technical, general and so forth. Even general education high schools can be divided into several groups according to the average *T*-scores of their students. For example, high schools with high *T*-scores are ranked in the first class and called *shingakuko*. Many of the private *shingakuko* schools have their own affiliated junior high school and provide the six-year unified school programs. In *shingakuko* high schools, almost all students are expected to enter famous universities after graduation. Therefore, especially for first class private secondary schools, almost all of which are located in principal cities such as Tokyo, Yokohama, and Osaka, the main purpose of teaching English is to prepare their students for the entrance examinations of these famous universities, which include a number of grammar manipulative questions (Gorsuch, 2000). Teaching methods that focus on grammar have been considered to be the most effective in aiding students to pass the university entrance examinations (Tanabe, 1990). This is the present condition of English language education in almost all first class private secondary schools in Japan and has been so for a long time.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

In view of the aforementioned ideals and actual situation, it is worthwhile to find a possible teaching method which can fulfill both the governmental ideals, which are the *Course of Study*, and the necessity of grammar teaching in the real teaching context. As long as oral reading has the aforesaid benefits on learners' communicative skills, it is necessary to reveal the extent to which oral reading can be fruitful for learners' grammatical knowledge. Here, the grammatical ability focused on in this study is *not* exactly what the SLA literature calls grammatical competence, which is the ability to structure and decode messages in terms of "the rules of morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology" (Canale and Swain, 1980: 29). Rather, this study is particularly interested in what Long (1988; 1991) names "Focus on Forms," that is, the development of learners' knowledge about grammar which centers around explicit grammar analyses and memorization of independent grammatical rules.

2 Procedure

2.1 Participants

The participants were three cohorts of students (hereafter Groups A, B and C) at a private boys' junior high school in Tokyo. Almost all the students in the three groups started to learn English for the first time at this school and went through the same syllabus. They did so at different times; Groups A, B, and C entered the school in 2010, 2009, and 2008 respectively.

All the three cohorts consisted of seven homeroom classes, each class having from 38 to 42 students with different English and general learning abilities. At this school, the members of every cohort are shuffled and assigned to homeroom classes anew once a year at the beginning of a new academic year.

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Target Grammar Items on School Syllabus

At this school, the syllabus for all cohorts is fixed. It covers a period of three consecutive academic years. The main grammar points listed in the syllabus for the first-year students are *be*-verbs, basic verbs, basic adverbs, basic prepositions, the present and past tenses, the present and past progressive forms, yes-no questions, *wh*-interrogatives, auxiliary verbs (*can, may, must*), basics of comparatives and superlatives, the existential *there*, countable and uncountable nouns, and the determiners of English. The items listed on the second-year syllabus are auxiliary verbs (*will, shall*), tag questions, the five basic sentence patterns, *to*-infinitives, negative questions, conjunctions (*before, after, while, when, although, if, unless*), phrases including comparative or superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs, the present perfect tense, the passive voice, relative pronouns and gerunds.

The syllabus requires the first year and the second year students to attend a 50-minute English lesson five times a week, and it also requires that each grammar point be taught in eight to ten lessons.

2.2.2 Teaching Staff

As for the teaching staff, Groups A, B and C were taught by three different groups of four Japanese teachers of English. There was some overlapping of teachers among the three groups.

2.2.3 Grammar Presentation

The presentation of grammar items was given in class through grammatical analyses of example sentences in the textbooks called *Birdland junior English I* (Yoshida, 2008a) and *Birdland junior English II* (Yoshida, 2008b) (*BJEI* and *BJEII* respectively). These textbooks consist of 14 and 12 chapters respectively. Each chapter of both the textbooks has three or four units, each of which is called *Focus*, a set of three to seven example sentences which contain the target grammar point(s) of each chapter. During and after the grammar explanations, students in all the three cohorts were made to do grammar exercises, which were all adopted from two grammar workbooks called *Birdland junior English I: Kansei mondaishu* (2008; *Birdland junior English I: Workbook for mastering grammar*) and *Birdland junior English II: Kansei mondaishu* (2008; *Birdland junior English II: Workbook for mastering grammar*). *Kansei mondaishu I* and *II* are grammar exercise books attached to *BJEI* and *II* respectively. As there was not enough time to cover all the questions in the workbooks, some specific questions were used for teaching all the three cohorts.

2.2.4 Reading Passages

All the three groups read passages from a reading section called *Power Up* attached to each chapter of the textbooks. In Both *BJEI* and *II*, each *Power Up* section consists of a series of different reading passages, the length of which varied from 30 to 160 words. Groups A, B, and C were all made to read one reading passage from each *Power Up* section. The selection of the passages is not designated in the school syllabus. Rather, the teaching staff in each year decided which passage to adopt before teaching.

In their first year, Groups B and C read the same set of ten passages, while Group A read twelve passages, including six passages which Groups B and C also read.

In their second year, Groups B and C read the same set of eleven passages, while Group A read twelve passages, five of which were the same passages that Groups B and C also read.

All the passages for the three groups in the first and second years were selected in such a way that they contained at least one sentence which included the target grammar point of each chapter. Table 1 shows the number of reading passages read by the three groups in their first and second years.

Table 1: The Number of *Power Up* Passages Read by Groups A, B and C

Cohort	Starting Year	Number of <i>Power Up</i> Passages	
		First Year of Junior High	Second Year of Junior High
Group A	2010	Six passages read also by groups B and C; six passages not read by either B or C	Five passages read also by groups B and C; seven passages not read by either A or B
Group B	2009	The same ten passages	The same eleven passages
Group C	2008		

2.2.5 Oral Reading in Group A

In its first and second years of learning, Group A was offered less time for grammar analyses than Groups B and C in order to set aside a certain amount of time for repetitious oral reading. The time allotted to oral reading was five to ten minutes in each 50-minute lesson.

As to the *Focus* sections of each chapter, whereas Groups B and C took time to learn all of the sentences through full grammatical explanations or precise grammatical analyses given by their teachers, Group A gave higher priority to oral reading than detailed analyses given by the teachers. That is, grammatical explanations or analyses were minimized in lessons for Group A.

Concerning the *Power Up* passages, they were introduced in the forms of listening comprehension with recordings attached to the textbooks, reading comprehension and grammatical analyses of the sentences in the passages. Again, in lessons for Group A, time for the grammatical analyses was minimized to make time for repetitious oral reading.

The styles of Group A's repetitious oral reading were decided by the teachers, who used various reading styles from day to day. The typical ways of reading aloud were chorus reading, individual reading, fast reading, timed reading, and a mixture of those methods.

2.3 Test

The study analyzed the results of the school's annual English review tests. The tests are conducted at the beginning of April every year. The tests examined in this study are the review tests taken by Groups A, B, and C after their first year (hereafter Test 1; full score was 200) and the tests taken after the second year of their learning (hereafter Test 2; full score was 200). The tests are designed in such a way that they cover the previous year's grammatical points. In Tests 1 and 2, the same questions were used for the three groups. The language skills covered in both tests were listening, spelling, and grammar.

Of all the results of the two tests, this study specifically analyzed the performance in the grammar sections of both Tests 1 and 2, whose full scores were 90 and 60 respectively. The question types employed in the grammar sections of Tests 1 and 2 were multiple-choice fill-in-the-gap questions, fill-in-the-gap questions without multiple-choice items, sentence structure analyses, word-reordering questions, paraphrasing questions, and translation from Japanese to English. Questions extracted from Tests 1 and 2 are shown in Appendices A and B respectively.

3 Results

The results of Tests 1 and 2 are shown in Tables 2 and 3 respectively.

Table 2: Results of Test 1

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group A	287	69.9	9.5
Group B	283	65.8	14.2
Group C	304	65.9	13.4

Table 3: Results of Test 2

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Group A	282	47.0	7.4
Group B	281	45.6	9.2
Group C	303	46.8	8.1

The results of Test 1 were the following: Group A (n=287, M=69.9, SD=9.5), Group B (n=283, M=65.8,

SD=14.2), and Group C (n=304, M=65.9, SD=13.4). A Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance on Test 1 indicated that there was a significant difference among the three groups ($\chi^2(2) = 12.85$, $p < .001$). A supplemental Scheffe's test (with alpha less than .05) revealed that Group A performed better than the other two groups did. The results of Test 2 were the following: Group A (n=282, M=47.0, SD=7.4), Group B (n=281, M=45.6, SD=9.2), Group C (n=303, M=46.8, SD=8.1). A Kruskal-Wallis analysis of variance on Test 2 indicated that there was no significant difference among the three groups ($\chi^2(2) = 2.05$). The relation between the score brackets and the number of students within the brackets is shown in Figures 1 and 2. The horizontal and vertical axes represent the score brackets and the number of participants respectively.

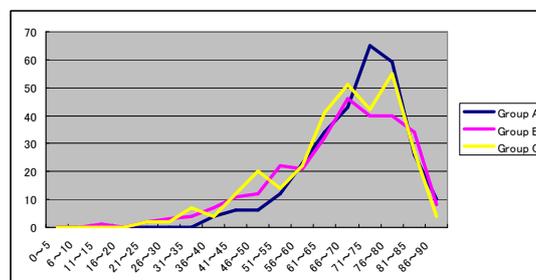


Figure 1: Integrated Line Chart for Test 1

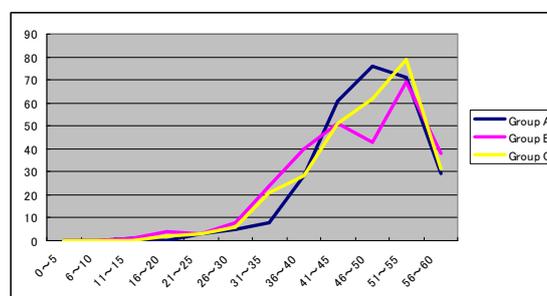


Figure 2: Integrated Line Chart for Test 2

4 Discussions

The aforementioned outcomes of the analyses of Tests 1 and 2 could suggest that Group A's first-year oral reading was effective significantly on Group A's first year grammar learning. However, the results also show that oral reading in Group A was not as effective in their second year of learning. Let us consider the reasons for the results.

4.1 Difference in Age

The difference in the outcomes in Tests 1 and 2 may have been related to the difference in the participants' cognitive development. Namely, oral reading might have been more fruitful for younger participants.

It has been suggested in general that exposure to a massive amount of input is more effective for younger learners (Thornbury, 1999). Moreover, repetitious oral reading may enable learners to be conscious of the basic sentence structure patterns of English sentences (Griffin, 1992). This may have supported Group A in dealing with various questions in Test 1. On the contrary, it has been argued that explicit and detailed language rule analyses are more effective for mature learners, such as adult learners or young learners with high Intelligence Quotients (Ando, Fukunaga, Kurahachi, Suto, Nakano, and Kage, 1992). If it is the case that the higher grade a student is in, or the more complicated the target grammar items become, the less effective oral-reading lessons become, then there might be a threshold point where grammar explanations would prove more effective than oral reading.

4.2 Degree of Complexity

The difference between the first year and the second in the effectiveness of Group A's oral reading can also be considered due to the difference in degree of linguistic and/or conceptual complexity between the grammar points in the first year and those in the second year. That is to say, oral reading in Group A may have been effective on relatively simple grammar points which are easy to put into a chunk, whereas it may not have been effective on more complex grammar points taught in the second year. Table 4 shows a possible classification of grammar points based on this assumption. Let us discuss the classification in detail below.

4.2.1 Simple grammar points in the first year

The grammar points in the first year may have been simple enough for Group A to understand while reading aloud. The simplicity may be due to the fact that these grammar points are either (a) operations in morphemic level, or (b) simple syntactic operations susceptible to chunking.

As to (a), grammar points such as plural *-s*, third-person singular *-s* and past tense *-ed* could have been simple enough for Group A to recognize during their oral reading, which may have strengthened their understanding of how those items behave in an actual sentence.

Regarding (b), the knowledge about the subject-verb agreement in use of *be*-verbs, the formation of negative sentences and yes-no questions, and the existential *there* may have been strengthened because they form fixed sentence structures such as *Are you-?*, *Is he-?*, *don't*, *didn't*, *Do you-?*, *Can I-?*, *There is a*, *Is there any*. Such structures may have been memorized by Group A as chunks while saying and hearing them during oral reading.

4.2.2 More complex grammar points in the second year

On the other hand, items in the second year may have required either careful analyses of complicated sentence structures or greater focuses on differences in meaning among similar language forms. It may have been difficult for Group A to decode complicated sentence structures or meaning at the same time they did oral reading. Such grammatical forms may be classified into the following three categories: (c) more complex syntactic operations, (d) more abstract concepts, (e) distinction among items under the similar but not the same grammatical points.

Grammar points grouped in category (c) would include relative pronouns and five basic sentence patterns. Relative pronouns require the understanding of the concept of trace and clause embedding, which would have been too challenging for Group A to fully grasp while reading aloud. Similarly, the five basic sentence patterns may have required the distinction between different parts of speech and various word order patterns during oral reading. Such mental processing may not have been manageable when Group A was reading aloud.

Category (d) includes such grammatical points that several different meanings are expressed by one language form. For example, the present perfect tense and *to*-infinitives can each convey several different meanings according to the context.

Table 4: Possible Classification of Grammar Points

	Nature of grammar points	Examples
First year	• Operations merely on the morphemic level	• Plural <i>-s</i> • Third-person singular <i>-s</i> • Past tense <i>-ed</i> • Regular conjugation of comparatives and superlatives
	• Simple syntactic operations often susceptible to chunking	• Subject-verb agreement in use of <i>be</i> -verbs when sentence subject is a pronoun • Formation of negative sentences, yes-no questions, present progressive and past progressive sentences • Existential <i>there</i>
Second year	• More complex syntactic operations	• Use of relative pronouns • Distinction and use of different parts of speech according to five basic sentence patterns
	• More abstract concepts	• The present perfect as opposed to the past • The meanings of <i>to</i> -infinitives • Difference in usage between gerunds and <i>to</i> -infinitives

4.3 Effectiveness in grammatical analyses in Groups B and C

What is notable is that the performance by Groups B and C in Test 1 was not as good as that by Group A, but Groups B and C caught up with Group A by the time Test 2 was given. This shows that, as far as the grammatical points dealt with in the second year were concerned, analytical learning may be more effective than, or, at least, as effective as oral reading.

5 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

The results of this study suggest that oral reading is more effective in improving junior high school learners' grammatical knowledge in areas where target items are characterized by relative grammatical and/or conceptual simplicity than in areas where target items require comprehension of complex structures and/or sophisticated concepts.

The above research results seem to have the following implications about the usage of oral reading as a possible method for teaching grammar to Japanese junior high school learners. That is, if the target grammar points are relatively simple or if the learners are relatively young, teachers may be advised to incorporate an ample amount of oral reading in their classes and, if the target grammar points are more complex or abstract or if learners are more mature, teachers should focus more on grammar analyses than on oral reading.

6 Limitations

As this study is a quasi-experimental study carried out in three sets of two school years at a junior high school, it has the following limitations.

Firstly, as Table 1 above indicates, the selection of the reading passages was not fully controlled. That is to say, the frequency of appearance of some target grammar points was different in Group A on one hand and Groups B and C on the other hand.

Secondly, the teaching staff varied. The three groups were taught by three different teams of four English teachers, who may have used different teaching skills and methods. It is possible to argue that the significantly high performance in Group A in Test 1 was due to the teachers.

Thirdly, the difference in the effectiveness of Group A's oral reading between the first year and the second may be attributed to the fact that Group A was exposed to first-year grammar points more frequently than Groups B and C. First-year grammar points, such as the *be*-verbs, may have appeared much more frequently than second-year points, such as the relative pronoun. This difference may have affected Group A more than it affected Groups B and C because oral reading was done repeatedly, exposing Group A to the same grammar points repeatedly and giving an advantage to Group A, which was not given to Group B or C. In other words, the performance by Group A may be the result of frequent exposure rather than oral reading. For further research, there seems to be a need for investigation on the frequency of appearance of each grammar point in the materials used by the three groups.

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1. She (a) a cake three days ago.
2. Kenji is in the soccer club. He usually (b) soccer after school.
3. He (c) cleaning his room then.
4. They are (d) in the sea.
5. Does Ms. Brown (e) Japanese? —Yes, she (f).

be
make
speak
play
swim
do

D 次の文を、それぞれ()内の指示に従って書き換えなさい。

1. Kumi went to the station by bus. (下線部が答えの中心となる疑問文に)
2. Hiroki sang an English song at the party. (下線部が答えの中心となる疑問文に)

E 次の日本語を英文にしなさい。

1. この味噌汁(this miso soup)には塩がたくさん入っています。
2. 彼の自転車は4台の中でいちばん新しい

Appendix B. Extracted Questions from Test 2

第4問 次の各問に答えなさい。

A. 次の日本語の意味を表す英文になるように、()内から最も適するものを選びなさい。

1. 彼は今日の午後ここに来るでしょう。
He (1 can /2 will /3 has) come here this afternoon.
2. パーティーに来てくれませんか。
(1 Do you /2 Will you /3 Are you) come to the party?

B. 次の ~ の下線部の不定詞と同じ用法を含む文を下の1~4より選びなさい。

<input type="text" value="27"/>	I was surprised <u>to meet her there</u> .
<input type="text" value="28"/>	Do you have a lot of things <u>to do</u> ?
<input type="text" value="29"/>	We went to the park <u>to play soccer</u> .
<input type="text" value="30"/>	It began <u>to rain</u> .
<input type="text" value="31"/>	There are many places <u>to visit</u> in Kyoto.
<input type="text" value="32"/>	<u>To write a letter in English</u> is today's homework.

- | |
|---|
| 1 Let's go to the sea <u>to swim</u> . |
| 2 I have something <u>to give you</u> . |
| 3 I'm happy <u>to meet you</u> . |
| 4 His work is <u>to wash cars</u> . |

C. 次の英文の()に入る最も適切なものを選びなさい。

- 1 Walk faster, (1 or /2 and) you'll be late for school.
- 2 (1 Before /2 When /3 Because) I was young, I studied English very hard.

D. 次の英文の()に入る最も適切なものを選びなさい。

1. It is important (1 for /2 of /3 at) us to eat breakfast every day.
2. 私はあなたに E メールで結果をお知らせします。
I'll (1 let /2 make /3 have) you know the result by e-mail.

E. 次の ~ の英文と文型が同じものを1~5より選びなさい。

<input type="text" value="46"/>	I got a camera.
<input type="text" value="47"/>	He named his dog Pochi.
<input type="text" value="48"/>	The boy looks very happy.
<input type="text" value="49"/>	Ms. Goto teaches us English.
<input type="text" value="50"/>	I swim in the lake every weekend in summer.
<input type="text" value="X1"/>	She made a dress for Jane.

- | |
|---------------------------|
| 1 I am very happy. |
| 2 She runs every morning. |
| 3 I gave him a book. |
| 4 He likes dogs. |
| 5 We call him Black Jack. |

F 次の英文の()に入る最も適切なものを選びなさい。

1. We have (1 been knowing /2 known /3 knew) each other for two years.
2. It has (1 been raining /2 rain /3 raining) since yesterday.

G 次の英文の()に入る最も適切なものを選びなさい。

1. The building was (1 build /2 built /3 builded) in 1950.
2. That picture (1 is taking /2 was taken /3 takes) in Nara.

H 次の英文の()に入る最も適切なものを選びなさい。

1. She has a dog (1 whose /2 which /3 whom) has blue eyes.
2. I have a friend (1 whom /2 who /3 which) works in Sapporo.

I 次の英文の()内の動詞の最も適切な形にするとき、不定詞(to ---)なら1を、動名詞(--- ing)なら2を、不定詞でも動名詞でもどちらでもよいものは3をマークしなさい。

1. I like (listen) to music.
2. They want (play) soccer in the park.

第5問 (英作文) 次の日本語を英文にしなさい。

1. レイチェル(Rachel)は大学(college)に行くことを決めた。
2. あなたはどこで生まれたのですか。