

What is the place of English at Elementary Schools in Japan?

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Introduction

This paper seeks to look at the role of the study of English in public elementary schools in Japan. Various factors are considered, including the reasons why second language learning has been considered beneficial at this age and factors which are contributing to pressure for it to be introduced at this age, its relationship to second language learning in Japan in general, and, in particular, whether conditions for greater success are going to be provided if it has the status of an elective subject or that of a compulsory one. As well as references to a range of literature on these issues, the results of a questionnaire given to elementary school teachers will be considered.

1. Rationale for Elementary English

A turning point in the development of second language learning in Japan, and second language learning in the pre-tertiary Japanese education environment predominantly concerns English, was the introduction of the 'Period of Integrated Study' (Sōgōtekina Gakushūno Jikan), hereafter referred to as P. I for brevity, from April 2002. As Kimura and Otagaki (2000: 49) state, the aims and rationale for this were far wider than the introduction of second language study. Rather,

“The rationale for the introduction of this study period is that under the present system, it is considered to be extremely inappropriate and almost impossible within the framework of conventional school subjects to develop a child's mind to creatively cope with problem-solving activities and to deepen his understanding of his own way of life.”

Thus, it can be seen as a reaction against the rigidity seen in the existing curriculum and indicated by many writers (e. g. Irwin Fukuzawa, Shimahara). However, the 'freedom' which it brings, in the sense of flexibility in syllabus development needs to be set against certain limits to resources, particularly specifically trained staff, which will be returned to. In addition, it also needs to be set against concerns about shortage of time which are seen as both resulting from a change to a five day school week, which took place in stages between 1992 and 2000, and a need to create time for the P. I. For example, within a decrease of total annual periods (45 minutes) from 1015 to 945, 110 periods were allocated for the P. I., while those for Japanese (Kokugo) were reduced from 210 to 180 and those for arithmetic (sansū) from 175 to 150 (Gakkō Kyōikuhō Shikō Kisoku).

Turning to English education in Japan, the desire to introduce and develop study at an earlier age can be seen as both resulting from 'external' factors related to a perception of an increase in the need to use English because of globalization, evidenced in such areas as economic interdependence and in language use in new media such as the Internet, and 'internal' factors, chiefly the perception of severe shortcomings in English education in Japan. Obviously these 'external' and 'internal' factors are connected. Not least concerned is the education ministry. In 1994 (1) it described English as “now indispensable for Japan's international activities” but also that, “Up until fairly recently, however, English was to a large extent the principal means of receiving information from outside, not of sending out or exchanging information.” Thus, such developments in use would require a change in teaching and learning methods. Globalization brings with it increased competition and perhaps the paramount way of measuring Japan's lack of success in English education has been through comparing scores on international examinations such as TOEFL and TOEIC. For example, mean scores of

Japanese taking the former in 2001-2 were 186 in comparison with other Asian scores including 205 (Koreans), 207 (Chinese) and 231 (Filipino Tagalog speakers) (Toefl Scores). While it can be said that results are skewed by the greater number of Japanese who are in a financial position to take such tests, Japan has also been in a financial position to provide resources for mass English education which many countries cannot match. However, combined with geographical and historical factors which have encouraged insularity, and a large population providing a 'critical mass' for the Japanese language, it is this same economic power which provides resources and a market for both educational and entertainment products which in many countries might only be available in English, reducing the need for English proficiency.

Thus, while shortcomings in English education are blamed on a variety of factors including teacher training, methods and the influence of entrance examinations, a key factor would seem to be limits to how much real 'need' there still is by the population. Even the same education ministry document referred to earlier displays this absence of clear need when it describes (1994: 2) in vague terms that,

"English is taught to practically all students, as it is selected overwhelmingly by the schools as their elective language. The reason is that some knowledge of English is thought to be vital for Japanese people in one way or another."

This points to an absence of clear motivation, a key factor, but one which will vary in its form according to the age of the learner.

So, can introducing English at an earlier age be positive? A wealth of studies have considered the role of age as a factor in language acquisition. As writers such as Ellis and Larsen-Freeman & Long show, even coming to cohesive conclusions as to what these studies prove is problematic. In particular, it is necessary to differentiate between the results of short-term and long-term research, and whether the basis of 'success' is attainment or rate of acquisition. According to Larsen-Freeman & Long (1991: 155), "As revealed by long-term studies, younger is better in the most crucial area, ultimate attainment, with only quite young learners being able to achieve accent-free, native-like performance in a SL (second language). As revealed by short-term studies, older learners are at an advantage in rate of acquisition." The issue of the relative importance of ultimate attainment and rate will be returned to. Ellis shows studies as revealing that children's second language acquisition is slower in the areas of grammar and vocabulary than adolescents, whose rate is faster than either children or adults. However, he also (1985: 106) indicates that, "The number of years' exposure contributes greatly to the overall communicative fluency of the learners, but starting age determines the levels of accuracy achieved, particularly in pronunciation." Perhaps the 'but' here seems rather overstated, as 'number of years' and 'starting age' may seem to be far from unrelated. Cook concludes his summary of the advantages of foreign language learning at an early age by stating (1996: 110) that, "Age itself is not so important as the different interactions that learners of different ages have with the situation and with other people." His words indicate the importance of the suitability of the kind of provision which is the central theme of this paper.

The main theoretical foundation for possible greater success of children in learning a first or second language has been 'the critical period hypothesis', by which children at a certain age are seen as in a unique position to have the flexibility to successfully learn a language. Although developed from earlier work, it is most associated with Eric Lenneberg. Lenneberg, albeit mainly concerning himself with first language acquisition, suggested that humans have a critical period for acquiring language before a 'cut-off' at adolescence. He wrote (1967: 176) that, "In the case of language, the limiting factors postulated are cerebral immaturity on the one end and termination of a state of organizational plasticity linked with lateralization of function at the other end of the critical period." However, the theory has been much criticized and objections are summarized by Aitchison (2001: 203-4) as particularly being in three areas. Firstly, research with young babies has shown early brain lateralization, studies of recovery from brain-damage and of children isolated for various reasons has shown that late acquisition can occur and finally, the success of adults in language acquisition. Rather than totally rejecting the idea of a 'critical period', Aitchison (2001: 204) espouses a weaker form in the idea of a 'sensitive period'. Seliger considers it important to give greater consideration to areas other than phonology and suggests (1978: 12, 16, 18) that the concept of 'multiple critical periods' may be more appropriate.

The background to introducing English at elementary school is likely to at least be influenced by such ideas of a 'critical' or 'sensitive' period. However, it is undoubtedly also an attempt to address the poor outcome, indicated above by test statistics, and to counter perceived deficiencies in the existing arenas of second-language English education, junior high school followed by senior high school. Curriculum reforms, particularly new syllabuses introduced for junior high school (1993) and senior high school (1994) have moved markedly in the direction of 'communicative' aims, as indicated by the way overall objectives are expressed in 'The Course of Study for Upper Secondary School' (2003):

"To develop students' practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages."

Throughout the subsequent syllabus, the words 'communication' and 'communicative' prevail. Leaving aside the efficacy of CLT (communicative language teaching) versus other methods such as grammar translation, writers (eg, Sakui (2004) and Taguchi (2002)) find that teaching has often not embraced these communicative aims. One key reason is the focus on entrance examinations (both for senior high school and for university), described by Sakui (2004: 156) as "a somewhat parallel curriculum" and widely seen as a negative and distorting influence. However, writers (eg, Guest (2000) and Tuitama-Roberts & Iwamoto (2003)) have found that such entrance examinations are now more communicative than they are often perceived to be, and they can be seen as providing a form of instrumental motivation which might be missed if they did not exist, given the 'needs' situation in Japan referred to above. In addition, other factors can be seen as crucial to successful CLT at this level, including the amount of time available, both class time and time available to teachers, and teachers' own confidence.

2. Alternatives to the core

Just as Sakui refers to a parallel curriculum above, it can be seen that, faced with a degree of intractability concerning change, a strategy in Japan has been to encourage or even force change by leaving the core essentially unchanged but setting up alternatives. This appears to be what is happening with the current approach to elementary English, particularly in its rejection of certain elements in existing Japanese English education. Another example, which is playing a certain role at the elementary level but a greater one at junior high and senior high level, is the JET scheme, which brings ALTs (assistant language teachers), mostly young graduates, into the school system. Established in 1987 with experience of earlier more limited schemes and continuously expanded, it is evidence that Japan can afford a strategy on a scale which few countries could manage. As McConnell (2000: 269) writes,

"the Japanese government has placed more than 20,000 foreigners in schools all over the country. In the thirteen years since the program began, ALTs have visited and team-taught on at least one occasion in virtually every one of Japan's 16,000-plus public secondary schools."

Involving a combination of single visits and greater continuity at single schools, it faced many problems particularly in the earlier years. However, McConnell sees it as having achieved much, both in bringing communicative teaching into schools and also in encouraging the local teachers of English to adapt to deal with it, a key aim of the scheme for the education ministry. Nevertheless, he (2000: 272) feels that its success remains somewhat peripheral when he writes that,

"this change is, for the most part, limited to specific contexts and shielded from the rest of the system, suggesting that it is a sign of an adaptive and pragmatic response and not a fundamental alteration of the culture."

Given perceptions of language teaching approaches as being entrenched at the post-elementary level, 'an adaptive and pragmatic response' could be seen as indicating a *raison d'être* for the current P. I. at elementary school too. Certainly, the guidelines for this course appear to be a reaction against the orthodoxy at junior high or senior high level, particularly with their concern for the avoidance of explicit grammar teaching which is a traditional feature at these levels. Education ministry advice in its 'Practical Handbook for Elementary

School English Activities' (2001) endorses a range of syllabi, including situational and task-oriented, but specifically excludes a grammar-oriented syllabus (146). Rather, in describing Elementary School "English Activities" (123), it states that "Their primary purpose is to foster interest and desire—not to teach a language."

In considering the merits of a compulsory system or an elective system, as at present, it is useful to briefly refer to the situation in other countries. As Singleton (1989: 3) points out, the 1970s saw critical views on the efficacy of elementary level foreign language learning in the United States and Britain. However, at least in Britain, the pendulum is swinging back, with teaching to this age range seen as avoiding some of the more serious behavioural problems at secondary school level, as well as trying to improve the country's poor record in foreign language learning. Perhaps two countries which are among the closest in similarity of circumstances to Japan are South Korea and Taiwan, given that they were also not colonised by English-speaking countries and have advanced economies and provision of compulsory education. In contrast to Japan, both have introduced greater provision for training of elementary teachers and have made it a compulsory subject. It would seem to be likely that the extent of their provision is an influence on their neighbour, Japan.

3. Teacher Questionnaire

This leads to considering how a survey carried out with 25 staff at an elementary school in Aichi Prefecture relates to the above issues. The informants consisted of 18 females and 7 males. While just eight were in their 20s or 30s, seventeen were in their 40s or 50s, with an overall median age of 43.5. Although the size of the survey has obvious limitations in terms of sample size, it might be expected that a study of the views of all teachers at one school will give a reasonably representative idea of typical attitudes among Japanese elementary school teachers.

The teachers were asked ten questions. Although shown in English in Figure 1, they were translated into Japanese for the informants. The questions are in two categories. The statements in the first category (questions 1 to 4) chiefly concern the overall status and efficacy of teaching English at elementary school, while the questions in the second and third categories (questions 5 to 10) concern more detailed issues, particularly regarding who should have the role of teaching English. As can be seen, question 1, concerning the issue of whether elementary school age is viewed as positive for English learning, brings out a somewhat

Figure 1: Results of a questionnaire administered to 25 teachers of elementary English

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	strongly agree	agree	slightly agree	neither agree nor disagree	slightly disagree	disagree	strongly disagree
1 : Elementary school age is a good time for children to learn English.	2	8	8	2	5	0	0
2 : English should become a compulsory subject at elementary school in Japan.	3	6	3	4	6	2	1
3 : English should be an optional subject as part of the 'Period of Integrated Study' (Sogotekina Gakushuno) as now.	0	3	3	11	4	4	0
4 : English should not be taught at elementary school.	0	0	1	6	5	5	8
	excellent	very good	good	quite good	fair	poor	very poor
5 : How do you feel about your own English ability?	0	0	0	0	0	8	17
6 : How do you feel about your experience of learning English at school and/or university?	0	0	0	3	11	10	1
7 : How do you feel about your ability to teach English at this school?	3	4	3	10	3	1	1
8 : What do you think of the idea of foreigners such as ALTs teaching classes?	11	9	2	2	0	1	0
9 : What do you think of the idea of Japanese assistants with particular English experience teaching the classes?	8	4	9	1	2	1	0
10 : What do you think of the idea of English being used across the curriculum (eg: in other subjects such as home economics and physical education)?	0	1	8	2	4	10	0

positive response, with a mean of 3 (SD=1.2329) on a seven point Likert Scale. A negatively framed question, question 4, produces a mean of 5.52 (SD=1.2687).

With regard to the question of who is best suited or qualified to do the teaching, responses to questions 8 and 9 show views which agree with the idea that a person other than the homeroom teacher may be beneficial, with means of 1.96 (SD=0.7851) and 2.52 (SD=1.3891) respectively. This may partly reflect a lack of confidence among such homeroom teachers who have not had specific training in foreign language teaching, as also found by Hogan (2004: 8). While, interestingly, responses to question 7, concerning their ability to teach English, provide a mean of 3.52 (SD=1.4999), those to questions 5 and 6 are less positive, respectively indicating a lack of confidence among teachers in their own English ability, with a mean of no less than 6.68 (SD=0.4665), and a largely negative attitude towards their own experience of foreign language education, with a mean of 5.16 (SD=0.7684). Furthermore, the latter does not show a marked improvement with the teachers in their 20s who could have experienced the newer communicative syllabuses referred to above. Such negative attitudes and perceptions, which might or might not be borne out by an objective test of the English ability of these teachers, run a risk of being passed on to the students.

What views are there on the central issue being considered in this paper, whether English should remain an elective subject or become a compulsory one? The central questions in relation to this are questions 2 and 3, which concern attitudes to compulsory or elective status for elementary English. Responses to question 2, which considers attitudes to the former, give a mean of 3.59 (SD=1.6989), while those to the latter give a somewhat more ambivalent mean of 4.12 (SD=1.1770). Thus, those responses both indicate greater support for compulsory provision. It is useful to look at additional comments by the subjects to consider why this is the case. One teacher (M, 51), who answered 4 to both questions 2 and 3, wrote that "If it is not a formal subject, it is difficult to give grades." In contrast, the response of another teacher (M, 54), who answered 7 to question 2 and 2 to question 3, is clearly influenced by his view that, "It is more important to teach Japanese which is the mother tongue, so for English, something like just feeling the sense is enough." While the latter may be influenced by worries about early foreign language learning being at the expense of mother tongue learning, in spite of research to the contrary, perhaps his concern is more simply about time. This is also referred to by another teacher (F, 38), who writes that, "It is an advantage to be able to speak English fluently, but at the moment teaching other subjects or some activities takes lots of time." This raises the question of whether the central issue is not necessarily the dichotomy of 'elective' versus 'compulsory', but rather the possibility presented by introducing it in various ways across the curriculum to make better use of time. On this point, the teachers are shown to have negative views, with a mean of 4.56 (SD=1.3879) and with 10 (40% of subjects) choosing 6, the second most negative response. As referred to earlier, it is likely that this particularly represents concerns with reduced time available for core subjects, such as Japanese and Mathematics.

4. Conclusion

Thus, the survey appears to indicate a preference towards compulsory provision combined with a desire to avoid impinging on other subjects. Certainly there are critics of the present elective system. However, these often depend on comparison. As I indicated before, it seems less helpful to compare it with markedly different learning environments. 'Immersion' type learning environments provide the positive feature of maximum time for exposure and do exist in Japan, as described for example by Bostwick (1995). However, comparison between these and provision in the public elementary school system, whether elective or compulsory, seems of limited validity given the vastly different conditions in such areas as time available for exposure. Rather than compare the Japanese situation with the well-known immersion type in Canada, Takagi takes the example of the more mainstream 'Core French' program in Canada, still a very different situation given that Canada has official bilingualism and given that the languages are linguistically more similar. While he finds shortcomings in that, he appears to endorse it (2003: 18-19) as a model for Japanese elementary English education to move towards, particularly in providing more trained teachers and greater instruction time.

However, a number of reasons can be seen as suggesting that an elective system is more suitable, at least at present. First, the position of the homeroom teacher. In the words of Kelly (2002: 31), "a disciplinarian,

provider of information, and a counselor in addition to being a teacher”, making it perhaps difficult to create the sense of ‘difference’ that a subject teacher or assistant can, whether foreign ALT or Japanese assistant. The JET scheme has been referred to above. While that operates in tandem with compulsory provision, that compulsory provision is provided by Japanese teachers who specialize in language teaching. At the elementary level, teachers do not have that specific training. As the survey indicates, this translates to a lack of confidence. Until they or their successors receive such training, universal compulsory provision is extremely problematic. Secondly, the present elective system enables a contrast to the perceived rigidity of the system referred to earlier. Although the flexibility it provides brings problems to teachers who are used to prescriptive guidelines, it potentially allows schools to make use of the resources, skills and even regional needs which they currently have, and as Hogan (2004: 7) reports, teachers may share the view of a grade 3 teacher who, “reported that although it would be easier to have more concrete guidelines, this would interfere with the purpose of teaching and the focus of EA would become teaching rather than communication.” Furthermore, it parallels the relative variation from place to place in provision of teaching assistants under the JET scheme. Finally, and also related to the JET scheme, perhaps one positive result will be that a mismatch perceived at junior high and senior high level will be reduced. This mismatch is seen by Tuitama-Roberts and Iwamoto (2003: 12) as being between the more ‘elementary’ materials used in communicative classes, including those with ALTs, and the more ‘advanced’ materials used in other English classes. It can be imagined that earlier exposure to communicative English through the current pattern of elective provision will at least contribute to enabling such ‘elementary’ skills to be tackled earlier, paving the way to greater success at a later age and enhancing positive features of age suitability, earlier starting age and a greater number of years’ exposure which were referred to earlier in this paper.

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