

# Elementary School English Education

## —The Present Condition of the Japanese Education System—

### 小学校英語教育は何をもたらすか —日本の英語教育の現状から考える—

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2002年度の学習指導要領の改訂に伴い、小学校で英語活動を行うことができるようになった。この小学校への英語導入という動きを生じさせた原因は、(1) 経済界からの強い要請、(2) 英語が話せることに対する憧れ、(3) 英語学習には適した年齢があるという臨界期説が考えられる。導入に当たっては、さまざまな賛成及び反対意見が出てきた。その主なものを見てみると、賛成意見としては、(1) コミュニケーションに対する積極的な態度が育つ、(2) BICS (basic interpersonal communication skills) の基本を伸ばせるが挙げられる。反対意見としては、(1) 英語よりもまず日本語の読み書きを教えるべき、(2) 英語学習と国際理解がどのように関連するのが不明確、(3) 誤った技能が身につく、(4) 臨界期説を疑問視、(5) 中学校で英語力をつけるべき、(6) 言語習得のためには時間数が足りない等である。

経済界や保護者などを含めた社会が英語教育に求めるものは、使える英語の習得、すなわち英語が話せる人間の育成である。これに対し、文科省が打ち出した英語活動の目的は国際理解教育の一環としての英語活動であり、この活動を通じて新しい日本人としてのアイデンティティーを確立することである。両者が目指すところには相当に大きなずれがある。研究開発校における英語学習の成果が示すように、英語力の習得はあまり期待できないかもしれない。しかし一方、英語活動を通じて自国の文化、及び異文化を理解しようとする態度が育つ、英語に関心を持ち抵抗感がなくなる、積極的にコミュニケーションをとろうとする態度が育つなどの成果は見られそうである。重要なのはこのような成果をどう評価するかである。

## 1. The Present Condition of Elementary School English Education

The class based on the Elementary Course of Study has been implemented in elementary and junior high school since April 2002. English activities can be done as a part of the learning process related to international understanding within the Period for Integrated Study at the elementary school level.

According to the data from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in July 2002, the percentage of the 22,847 public elementary schools carrying out English activities in the third grade was 51.3%, in the fourth grade was 52.3%, in the fifth grade

was 53.6% and in the sixth was 56.1%. The percentage of the schools which did English activities in 2000 was 20%, and 42% in 2001, so it is increasing steadily. But since many of the schools with English activities (63%) actually do them for just one to eleven hours a year, we may say that these schools should reconsider how they do English activities.

## **2. Purposes of Learning English within the Period for Integrated Study**

Foreign language conversation particularly English conversation is within the area of international understanding listed as an example of the learning activities to be done in the Period for Integrated Study. The Elementary Course of Study refers to learning English as follows:

When conducting foreign languages conversation activities within the studies for international understanding, activities should incorporate experiential learning, appropriate for elementary school age students, in which children are exposed to foreign language and familiarized with the culture and daily life of foreign countries.

The Elementary Course of Study commentary general rules edition (1999) states the following:

When conducting foreign language conversation activities within the Period for the Integrated Study according to the students' situations along with consideration of local and school circumstances, activities should avoid jumping ahead to address topics for junior high school.

Examples of acceptable English activities are singing, playing games, doing quizzes or participating in make-believe play activities.

Judging from the above, the purposes of learning English within the Period for Integrated Study are limited to the following five scenarios:

- a) To be done as a part of learning about international understanding
- b) To avoid topics for junior high school
- c) To expose students to foreign languages
- d) To allow students to become familiar with foreign life, culture, and so on.
- e) To be experiential learning

## **3. The Movement which Brought about this Present Condition**

The introduction of English education in elementary schools was a policy, which was carried out as a part of the general language education policy. Two movements are related to

elementary school English education. The first one is the introduction of English education in elementary schools. It began in the 1990s and is the more mainstream of the two. The other is a series of language education policy, which led to the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” (2003) by the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry. Currently the former is the bigger movement.

#### **4. The Reason for the Movement to Introduce English Education in Elementary School**

There are three reasons why this movement has developed. First, the movement was formed at the request of the industrial world. Second is the people’s desire to speak English. Third is the critical period, optimal for foreign language learning. Experts differ on the precise beginning and end of this window. Studies indicate that it is four to eight or nine years of age, or to the beginning of the teens. Others suggest that around 10 years of age is the best time for language learning. In any event, after that age, it becomes difficult to acquire a language.

We shall discuss these three reasons in detail. First, the introduction of English education in elementary schools has been strongly requested by the economic world for more than thirty years. In addition to that, many Japanese have been exposed to rapid globalization in recent years, and they have been forced to interact with foreign countries and non-native speakers of Japanese in various fields. We are expected to thoroughly master practical English in many areas of our daily lives.

Second, the people’s desire to speak English is based on a psychological complex about English conversation. This complex causes the problem that no one objects to an argument like *our main English problem is that we can’t speak it*. Although the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry had various reforms in English education, the average Japanese TOEFL score is the lowest of all the Asian countries. However, no one says that the reforms are wrong. The English learning plan in elementary schools comes and goes without opposition.

Third, it is said that it is impossible in Japan’s English system for students to use English even if they graduate from a high school or a university because they start to learn English from junior high school. Some people say it is too late, and the earlier students start to learn a language, the better they can acquire it.

The argument is based on the critical period. When we learn a foreign language during the

period rather than after it has past, we can reach a higher proficiency level.

## 5. Purposes of English Education

The purpose of English education in elementary schools is to develop practical English ability so that students acquire a sense of English-speaking culture and grow accustomed to the English language. But this purpose seems to be different from the reason for the movement to introduce English education in elementary schools. According to the Elementary Course of Study each elementary school can conduct English conversation activities within the studies for international understanding in order to build up learning ability, thinking ability, and zest for living within the Period for Integrated Study. Based on the Elementary Course of Study mentioned above, we shall consider the need to expose elementary students to foreign language.

The question of introducing foreign language education in elementary schools has been a point of discussion in education policy for a long time. Because there has been a request that we learn to speak English and in order to do that, we had better begin to learn it in childhood, the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry examined the specialists' opinions and the results of the research about learning English in the pilot schools (n=66) and finally decided to introduce English conversation within the area of international understanding starting from 2002. This international understanding aims at understanding cross-culture, having cross-cultural communication, and co-existing with other countries' peoples. From this point of view, elementary schools need to conduct experiential studying so that students can develop willing attitudes toward studying English, comfortable mentalities when speaking English, and practical abilities for using English.

The reason why learning a foreign language is introduced in elementary schools is to deal with globalization. It is not only required in society but also thought of as a chance to establish our identity through communication with foreigners. Moreover, elementary school students are extremely interested in new things and are at a stage where they can naturally absorb other cultures through language. In addition to that, those, whose activation of the right-brain is strong, are sensitive and can catch things intuitively. As a result, childhood is considered the best time for foreign language learning<sup>1)</sup>.

In other words, the class aims retaining Japanese identity as a people who have an international awareness through the understanding of cultures by learning languages and through familiarity with English rather than enhancing their English practical use ability. But this purpose is different from the reason for the movement to introduce English in elementary schools.

## 6. Support for and Opposition to the Elementary Education System

Elementary School English education has been widely discussed. It started with the argument of lower academic ability. Lower academic ability also was widely discussed not only by those who were affiliated with education but also by the public. No sooner did they know the basic purposes of the Elementary Course of Study (which advocates a 30% reduction in textbook content in addition to allowing individual schools to pursue their own unique pressure-free education initiatives) than they were afraid of lower academic ability.

Another argument began from *University students who can't solve fractions* written by Kouji Okabe, Nobuyuku Tose, and Kazuo Nishimura (1999). The findings of their study showed that one-fifth of high level university students could not answer questions with fractions. Although that was certainly shocking, many university teachers had already recognized university students' lower academic ability. The problem was, people insisted, that the reason for their lower academic ability was because of the flexible, pressure-free education system pushed by the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry since 1981. Now, lower academic ability encompassed not only university students but also elementary, junior high and high school students.

In 2000, people were very worried about the contents of the Elementary Course of Study that had pushed for flexible, pressure-free education. They criticized the Period for Integrated Study because it was made by cutting down class time in other, more academic subjects.

It seems that the lower academic ability dispute has nothing to do with elementary school English education. But this dispute influenced the introduction of English in elementary schools in two ways. One way is that people insisted that we should regard fundamental academic ability as the highest priority. Elementary school students should learn Japanese reading and writing and should not learn English. Those who are opposed to elementary school English have consistently said that we should teach them Japanese before English.

The other way is through criticism from both supporters and opponents of elementary school English. They think that teaching English during the Period for Integrated Study is incomplete. The supporters insist that we should introduce English as a subject as soon as possible. The opponents criticize that there is a difference between the purposes of the Period for Integrated Study and English activities.

### 6.1. Support for the Elementary Education System

Then let us take a look at the pros and cons. The first pro is that English education raises the active attitude toward communication. When children learn languages, they have to pay attention to it and struggle in order to understand what speakers say and to say what they want, unlike when using their native tongue. Children try to listen carefully and understand what speakers say with hints from gestures and facial expressions. Moreover, they try to express what they want to communicate by gesturing, showing real things, and drawing pictures. When they can communicate with others in English, they are happy to do so. They try harder to listen to what others say and speak more. Children foster a positive attitude toward communication through this experience<sup>3)</sup>.

The second pro is that students can build up the basis of Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) through English activities. This is the fundamental ability for communication such as greetings, pleasant responses to others, and the ability to show consideration and build good relationships with others. Although there may be an opinion that BICS should be taught in the Japanese language class, we can expect children to learn not only BICS but also English within the Period for Integrated Study and transfer BICS to Japanese<sup>3)</sup>. The transfer to Japanese is based on the common underlying proficiency model of Cummins (1980a and 1981a). This model can be represented in the analogy of two icebergs which represent two languages. "The two icebergs are separate above the surface. That is, two languages are visibly different in outward conversation. Underneath the surface, the two icebergs are fused so that the two languages don't function separately. Both languages operate through the same central processing system" <sup>4)</sup>. Therefore, a transfer from English to Japanese becomes possible. Even if it is taught in the Japanese language class, it is a short leap to transfer those skills to English.

### 6.2. Opposition to the Elementary Education System

Now we shall move to the oppositions. The most common opposition is students should learn Japanese reading and writing first rather than English. The most important thing for elementary school students who are on the word development stage is to acquire the various language skills in Japanese. These skills are important when we learn not only Japanese but also a second language. Students should develop the ability to think logically, read, write, and communicate in Japanese before they learn English.

The second opposition objects to the purpose of English education in the elementary

school, which is not to develop English ability but to deepen international understanding. The biggest problem is that it is not clear how international understanding relates to English learning<sup>5)</sup>.

The third opposition to it is that the students might acquire the wrong knowledge and skills if they are taught English by teachers who do not receive enough English education training.

There are some people who doubt the critical period, which is one of the reasons to introduce English into elementary school<sup>6)</sup>. Students succeed in foreign language learning if they start it in the critical period. But this success is brought about only in the case that after they start to learn it, they stay in the country where the target language is spoken. The environment in Japan's English classes is different from the situation mentioned above.

Although a native speaker such as an ALT may participate in the class, students are mostly Japanese; and they speak Japanese after the class ends. The environment is different from the bilingual student's case.

Also, it's not clear what kind of mechanisms of brain function happen during the critical period. Lenneberg says that it relates to *one side-ization* of the language function. It is believed that language functions are in the left hemisphere of the brain. This isolation of brain function is called one side-ization. Lenneberg thought that there is a difference in the process of language acquisition between the case of starting to learn a foreign language before language functions were completely formed and the case of starting afterward. The critical period is caused by this difference. But that has not been proven from the viewpoint of neurophysiology.

Moreover, as Lenneberg recognizes, we can acquire language past the critical period. However, ability to acquire language gradually declines after the critical period.

The next argument against it is that students should develop English language skills in junior high school<sup>7)</sup>.

It is necessary to develop the basis of four skills in junior high school and high school: reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students should learn the basic skills, especially listening and speaking in junior high school, which has the introduction period for English learning.

At least five English classes a week should be held in order for the students to build a foundation little by little. Junior high school students are suited for language learning, because

during this period their cognitive faculties are fully developed and they are good at memorizing. They should have enough hours to learn, and they should have excellent teachers in junior high school.

The last argument against it is that the English class frequency in elementary schools is not enough to learn the language.<sup>8)</sup> I can say for sure that the English class frequency in elementary schools is about twice a week from third grade. If students have English class twice a week until the sixth grade, how many hours will they learn? Two hours  $\times$  35 weeks = 70 hours a year. But a class hour is actually 45 minutes, so the actual time is 52.5 hours a year. Fifty-two-point-five  $\times$  4 years from third grade to sixth grade = 210 hours. It is often said that we need 2,000 hours in order to acquire a language, but 210 hours is scarcely one-tenth of that amount. Furthermore, even if students learn English for 200 hours in elementary school, it is one-tenth as effective as it is when they concentrate on learning.

Elementary school English education has been debated like this for many years, and the argument is still going on. In spite of the dispute, English activities were actually introduced in elementary schools. The Education, Science, and Technology Ministry specified pilot schools and did research on English education before the introduction. Next, let us take a look at the results and the problems of this research.

## **7. The Results of the Research**

The Education, Science, and Technology Ministry began research related to English education in public elementary schools in 1992 and specified an elementary school in Osaka as a pilot school. Since then, many pilot schools have researched elementary curriculums, which adopted foreign language learning and submitted a report about progress, results, and problems of the research.

The Education, Science, and Technology Ministry decided to introduce English as an activity, not as a subject, after examining the research results of fifty schools in 1998. This decision was implemented in 2002, but each school can decide whether they do English activities or not.

### **7.1. The Students' Change**

Let us look at the students' changes from the report of the pilot schools.



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- The students generally enjoy English activities and are likely to behave themselves. On the other hand, however, some students are poor at doing activities like singing and playing games.
- The students' view has broadened. It seems that they have become more familiar with foreigners and foreign countries.
- They developed the ability to express themselves.<sup>9)</sup>

These are the main items. There is also the following report. To the question of "Is English class pleasant?" 92% of students answered *it is pleasant*. More importantly, about 90% of the lower grade students and about 50% of the middle grade students answered *it is very pleasant*. But as students become older, the rate of the students who feel it is very pleasant decreases. The activity, which is liked by all grades is playing games (79%). Songs are liked by the lower grades (50%), and studying with an ALT is liked by the upper grades(25%).

As for regarding other cultures and intercultural communication, the students' behavior was dramatically better among those who had studied English in elementary school. Especially in the upper grades, more than 60% of the students asked questions actively and gave opinions in class. Conversely, the report says that the students' attitude toward listening to others was worse.

The following question was asked to teachers who did English activities at the 295 pilot schools. "What do you think students developed through English activities?"

- Teachers said understanding our own and other cultures. Students want to try to understand other countries. 124 schools
- Teachers said students have an interest in English. Students do not hesitate to use English. Students are familiar with English, and try to have fun learning it. 120 schools
- Teachers said students have an attitude and ability to try to communicate with others. 78 schools
- Teachers said students become positive.  
Students who study poorly can be active.  
Cheerfulness  
Confidence 70 schools
- Teachers said students can associate with foreigners without prejudice.  
Students feel friendly toward foreigners. 64 schools
- Teachers said international sense, broad view, symbiosis, and consideration. 39 schools
- Teachers said the ability of expression. 23 schools
- Teachers said students' interest in Japanese deepens as well.  
Listening ability  
Pronunciation 17 schools<sup>10)</sup>

First, 124 out of 295 schools, which did English activities mentioned understanding our own and other culture, and 120 mentioned interest in and familiarity with English. Next, about 70 schools mentioned the desire to try to communicate with others, confidence, cheerfulness, and so on.

Even if there are not many English classes a week, these kinds of mental results can be expected.

Another investigation was conducted into the actual condition of junior high school students who experienced learning English in elementary schools.

- Students quickly respond without hesitation to greetings, classroom English, and being addressed by an ALT.
- Listening and speaking abilities are better.
- Students' attitudes toward ALTs are often natural.

Also, the investigation shows that the problem in junior high school English education is that there are differences among students in motivation for studying English and academic ability.

- Most students can speak and listen to the words and sentences introduced in the first grade of junior high school. But some students, who find English difficult, think songs, games, and skits are childish or worthless and do not show any interest in other countries.
- On the other hand, some students are excellent in reading and writing by learning in elementary schools<sup>11)</sup>.

The most important result of foreign language learning in elementary schools is that students discover something new within themselves and change.

## 7.2. The Result of English Ability

On the other hand, as for the result of English ability, the elementary schools hardly announce results on such criteria as pronunciation, listening, speaking and so on, because the purposes of English activities are not to develop English ability to cultivate familiarity and comfort. But there has been some research done on this aspect of being exposed to English in elementary schools.

Let us introduce Shirohata's experimental study<sup>12)</sup>. Shirohata compared English ability of students who experienced English activities at a pilot school for three years with students who

did not. He conducted three experiments from December to February in the first grade of junior high school: Experiment 1 was the ability to distinguish phonemes, Experiment 2 was pronunciation ability, and Experiment 3 was speaking ability. The results were that there was no statistically significant difference between experienced students and inexperienced students in these three experiments. That is, there is no difference in the English ability between the two groups.

Noteworthy in this research is that the abilities of listening and speaking, which are thought to be improved in elementary school English education, were the same between experienced students and inexperienced students. According to Shirohata's interpretation, it seems that the reason why the elementary school's method was not effective in improving English ability is very simple. That is because the students have little time to experience English. The students do English activities once a week, and they are mainly games such as bingo and fruit basket without learning pronunciation. We cannot expect students to develop English ability if they only do activities 35 hours a year for three years.

Let us consider one more investigation by the project team of the Japanese Child English Pedagogy Meeting (JASTEC)<sup>13)</sup>, which has promoted the introduction of English education in elementary schools.

This is an investigation concerning the English skills of 850 junior high and high school students some of whom learned English in elementary school and some who did not. The results of their study revealed a number of noteworthy findings.

As for pronunciation, the students who learned English were slightly better than the students who did not in the first grade and third grade of junior high school and second grade of high school, but the difference is not statistically significant. As for English knowledge, experienced students were better than inexperienced students in the first grade of junior high school, but after that the difference between both groups almost disappeared. As for English practical use ability, experienced students were better than inexperienced students in the first grade of junior high school, but the difference between the two becomes smaller in the third grade of junior high school. However, experienced students become better than inexperienced students again in the second grade of high school.

## **8. Conclusion**

We have surveyed the introduction of English education in elementary schools and looked

at the results provided by pilot schools. Many critics, teachers, and parents still actively argue whether elementary school English education is necessary or not. However, English education was introduced in elementary schools not as a subject but as an activity. The Education, Science, and Technology Ministry is considering whether English should be introduced as a subject or not.

As I previously stated, the industrial world's and the parents' request for English education is to acquire practical English, that is, to raise those who can speak English. Meanwhile, the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry says that English activities are a part of international understanding, and the purpose is to generate international understanding as a part of the new Japanese identity. There is a great difference between the two purposes.

If English education is introduced in elementary schools in earnest later on, I think people will say that even if students study English in elementary school, they cannot speak it. Then, at that time the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry will reply that they are not learning English but rather international understanding.

But, on the other hand, it seems that students, who try to understand our own and other cultures have an interest in English and try to communicate with others. The most important thing is how we evaluate such results. They can be interpreted in various ways. I believe the mental results from the English activities mentioned above are very important, but I am not certain that students have to learn these in an English class, which was set up by reducing the other subjects' classes. Students need to learn this intercultural understanding, but they can do it in classes other than English. They can develop an understanding of other cultures and the attitude to try to communicate actively with others in classes other than English. It is only English class that has an interest in English. But they can do that when they become junior high school students. Intensive English learning in junior high schools is more effective than English activities in elementary schools. If we teach students English, it should not be English activities but rather English learning, and we should place special emphasis on the acquisition of skills. I do not object to English learning in elementary schools, but I oppose the current use of English activities by the Education, Science, and Technology Ministry because the Ministry does not intend them to be used for the acquisition of English ability. The only way for students to acquire the skills they need and desire is to teach them English as a subject.

#### Notes

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