

# Primary English Teaching: A New Development in Japan

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## Introduction

There has been a world-wide increasing interest in and expansion of primary foreign language teaching, attested by an emergence of informative studies on the present states of a selected group of countries concerning their institutionalised second and/or foreign language provisions for primary education (e.g., Johnstone 1994: 11-18; Dickson and Cumming 1996; and Sallabank 1999: 1-5). Seemingly along with the development of this global perspective of inquiry, there also has been a proliferation of studies dealing with this field of education in a more comprehensive manner than before (e.g., Halliwell 1992; Driscoll and Frost 1999; Moon 2000; and Sharpe 2001).

The present study focuses on Japan, where “hands-on learning activities to expose children to foreign languages” has been introduced into the nation’s primary curriculum as an optional element after a series of government -assigned school-based explorations in the 1990’s (see Notes [1] for information source). How many of us who have learned English in this country expected that English would be introduced in primary education? Primary school English now seems here to stay in Japan. Reflecting teachers’ and researchers’ interest and involvement in the current English-related educational venture, resource materials, mainly those written in Japanese, or translated into it, have started occupying a noticeable place in primary education sections in book shops. Judging from my personal experience, there has been a growing participation of primary school teachers in research associations concerned with either teaching English to children or English teaching at school in more general terms (e.g., JASTEC, FELES).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the social context of those primary school teachers who have been involved in the recent development of primary school English-related teaching in this country. It attempts to offer a brief historical overview of the place of foreign language provision in the country’s primary education curriculum and examine its present state of affairs. The main focus of the examination is on politically and socially institutionalised situations. Information resources from the government, educational organisations and survey studies are utilised.

It may be useful for the reader to note that there are two educational sectors: public and private. Schools in the public sector can further be divided into local and national schools. Most children go to schools established by their local government. The numbers and percentages of the three types of schools in the school year 2001 were 23,719 local schools (99 percent), 73 national schools (0.3 percent) and 172 private schools (0.7 percent) (see Notes [2] for source). The average age of primary school teachers in 2001 is reported to have been 43.4, which has been the oldest average since 1977.

## 1. The introduction of primary English into the public sector

English teaching in primary education is a new development in the 130-year-history of Japan's modern time educational system. Behind this situation lies the perceived social need to promote the foreign language proficiency of the Japanese people as expressed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (henceforth, MEXT) in response to the more intensified global perspectives for the nation and its relationships with other countries and peoples. Having gone through a transitional stage towards the total enforcement of the new Courses of Study in April 2002, MEXT now states that:

The progress of internationalization has made an extremely important issue of improving the foreign language communication abilities of children who will shoulder the next generation.

Thus, in the new Courses of Study for lower and upper secondary schools, foreign languages have become compulsory subjects, and greater emphasis is placed on the cultivation of fundamental and practical communication abilities. MEXT has made possible conversation lessons in foreign language in the newly established Period for Integrated Study as part of education for international understanding at elementary school (see Notes [3] for source for this direct citation).

That foreign languages had been an optional subject until the school year 2001 does not imply that the subject matter had not been taught to a great or even noticeable extent in secondary education. English has been largely encompassed in entrance examinations into upper secondary and higher education nationwide. Although the exact percentage of the schools offering English teaching is not available, the language may well be described as something which had been a quasi-compulsory subject in secondary education. The phrase "practical communication abilities" in the above message, which corresponds word-to-word to the Japanese phrase "jissenteki komyunikeshon noryoku", shows a specific orientation towards which English teaching has recently been geared, though it is not necessarily equated with the concepts of communicative competence as defined by educational linguists (e.g., Canale and Swain 1980, Cummins 1980). The above message also contains a particular phrase being used for primary foreign language, namely, "conversation lessons in foreign language". This phrase can be associated with the focus placed on the aural and oral aspects of foreign language learning. However, it is left open for further pursuit to examine how this particular word has influenced primary school teachers' conceptions and what their actual foreign language lessons are like.

In principle, the Courses of Study are also to be applied to private schools. However, it is worthwhile to note that one may gain a different historical view of foreign language teaching when looking at the private sector, which has been partially related to the missionaries sent to this country since the beginning of its modern era of education. According to Otani's survey (1988), 79 percent of the 118 schools which responded to her questionnaire (out of a total of 159 private schools then) were teaching either English (77 percent) or French (2 percent) as a school subject. 64 percent of the former English group introduced English teaching before the Second World War, and the year of introduction varied from 1877 to 1987. At the time of this writing, there is one private institutional organisation which offers immersion programmes in English at its kindergarten and its primary and secondary schools (see Notes [4] for information source). In addition, I am aware of a private school organisation which has been well-known for German teaching.

## 2. Earlier explorations

It is pointed out by Sallabank (1999) that in the recent expansion of primary foreign language teaching, many countries have

proceeded from small-scaled experiments to general provision of foreign language. This is also the case in Japan. Looking further at more micro levels of provision, however, reveals context-specific features of the educational venture, as well. A chronological examination of the recent development of primary English teaching in this country follows.

The earlier experimental phase of primary foreign language, more precisely, that of primary English teaching in the public sector, has been for three-year exploratory studies assigned and funded by MEXT. It can further be divided into two groups: 1) studies which started in different years between 1992 and 1997, which, according to Kageura (1997), involved a total of 63 schools; and 2) more recent group of exploratory studies on teaching English as a school subject now in 2002 under implementation at 5 schools.

Before these phases of experimental studies, English had been introduced into a portion of primary schools in the country in various forms inclusive of extra-curricular activities. It is reported by Otani (1988) and Ito et al (1992) that Chiba Prefecture, where Narita International Airport is located, has the longest history. In 1972 the then governor initiated offering optional English club activities for pupils in Year 5 and Year 6 at 15 local schools in the prefecture.

Ito et al's survey (1991) presents charted results on the state of each regional area in terms of English-related teaching as grasped by their boards of education in 1990. In the first phase of the survey, 399 respondents out of 1017 boards of education from prefectures, cities and Tokyo wards; and in its second phase, 148 boards of education for a more detailed and precise survey. An examination of the information shows two factors most relevant to English learning among the typological categories set up for the survey. First, English lessons were being offered either as a regular or optional class: in the areas of 8 boards of education out of 148 respondents in the second phase, once a week in 6 areas among them. Second, English club activities existed in the areas of 31 boards of education out of 148, once a week in 24 among them.

The percentage of relevant schools in the area of each applicable board of education varied, from 1/7 to 100 percent in English lessons, and from 1/61 to 100 percent regarding an English club. A much higher percentage is occupied by other categories concerning sessions either for cultural understanding or in association with a native speaker teacher. They were given in the areas of 133 boards of education out of 148; among them 90 boards of education refer to the primacy of pupils' communicative experiences with people from other countries.

The newest phase is for the horizon which has been opened up to all primary schools in the country. As mentioned earlier, what is termed by MEXT "conversation lessons in foreign language", or, more formally as depicted in the new Course of Study for Primary Schools, "hands-on learning activities to expose children to foreign languages", can now in 2002 be offered by any school as an optional component of the newly introduced category of "the Period for Integrated Study", which applies Year 3 through Year 6. The optional elements covered in the Period for Integrated Study are international understanding, to which activities in a foreign language are ascribed, environmental issues, social welfare and health, and information fields concerned with the use of computers.

An official referential material is now available to primary school teachers for their English teaching. It is the book entitled "Practical Handbook for Elementary School English Activities", which was published by MEXT in 2001 and has been distributed to schools nationwide. It is necessary to consider the book's relationship to government-assigned exploratory studies in the 1990's. Those government-assigned studies have not gone through any national assessments as has been the case in national pilot projects in some other countries (e.g., in Britain). If I understand the situation correctly, the handbook

is the only data, and therefore precious, through which we might see certain directions of primary English teaching further projected on the basis of an examination of government -assigned studies.

### 3. Present state of affairs

For a search for the present state of affairs of primary English teaching in Japan, information is not available as to the number of the schools in the public sector nationwide which offer opportunities for activities in English in the school year 2002 or to its percentage to the total of local and national schools. According to a survey conducted in 2002 by Toyama Prefecture Board of Education, the results of which I obtained through a telephone conversation, the percentage of public schools in Toyama which have started offering English activities varies from pupils' year to year. However, they are collectively centred around 80 percent. The details of their implementation, such as activity frequency and types, those teachers engaged in the job, regular or occasional instruction, cannot be obtained from their survey.

There is one more relevant survey study which was conducted by Labo International Exchange Foundation in 2000, prior to the total enforcement of the new Course of Study for Primary Schools, to discover schools' attitudes towards and ideas about the inclusion of "English activities" and "international understanding" in the Period for Integrated Study. The results of the study are based on its 2,255 responding schools (some 9.4 percent of the total at that time) and 235 boards of education in 17 selected prefectures.

One useful result is that, as for the degree of popularity of the theme given primacy, "international understanding" (in which English activities are included in the MEXT framework) was chosen by 31.6 percent of the respondent schools. It was also surpassed by "environmental issues" (62.4 percent) and "social welfare and health" (43.9 percent), and followed by "information" (21.6 percent). This suggests that it may be highly unlikely that the whole class periods for Integrated Study (i.e., Year 3 and Year 4: 105 class periods <about 79 hours> a year; Year 5 and Year 6: 110 class periods <82.5 hours> a year) will be devoted to English. The result on the state of English teaching shows that 36.9 percent of the schools had already introduced English activities, 32.3 percent of which were offering English in the form of regular classes only, and 31.1 percent of the respondents were either in preparation for or consideration of English teaching. The total of these percentages are a little less than those mentioned above, regarding Toyama Prefecture Board of Education.

The survey also touches upon the area of teacher learning by asking about the two major issues to deal with for English activities. The top three issues chosen by the responding schools were teaching content selection and course planning (chosen by 61.4 percent of the respondents), teacher learning opportunities (selected by 57.4 percent), and employment of teachers from outside the school (by 52.5 percent). One more result which concerns classroom teaching is what instructor/s regarded as most appropriate: a native-speaking Assistant Language Teacher (selected by 71.1 percent of the schools), who has been invited to Japan through the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme, a class teacher (selected by 24.0 percent), and a Japanese instructor from outside the school (by 13.1 percent). This seems to suggest that many schools rely on native-speaking teachers and that, by comparison, primary practitioners have less confidence in their own competence in English instruction.

From a political point of view, the policy of a general possibility for English teaching would lead to a greater need to offer teacher learning opportunities than before on the side of the government. Since 2001 MEXT has been offering a two-week study programme in English-related teaching for those primary school teachers who are expected to play future leading roles

in primary education in their home prefectures, to which 600 teachers are sent every year. Information on the content of the programme is not available in this study. One local government has also started offering a teacher training programme. The government of the northernmost prefecture (i.e., Hokkaido) provides a programme organised in cooperation with the Province of Alberta in Canada, through which a group of primary school teachers in the prefecture are sent to the University of Alberta (see Notes [5] for information source).

Will English be placed in the primary curriculum as a school subject matter, like Japanese, arithmetic, social studies and science? The government's future prospects on this matter have not been announced. What can be noted here is that, as mentioned earlier, government-assigned exploratory studies on English teaching as a school subject have been launched recently at a very small number of schools. In addition, there are some leading figures in the area of primary English teaching in Japan who express a favourable prospect, as shown in a report on the interviews conducted by the publisher Soikusha (2002) with the Head of the Japan Association of Primary School English Teaching and a researcher from the Research Centre for Education Curriculum in National Institute for Educational Policy Research of Japan (see Notes [6] for source).

What requires further attention is that the Round Table on English Language Education Reform (which is subordinate to MEXT), in its plan for strategies towards educating Japanese people to be able to use English more effectively (which were presented in its July 2002 report), shows the importance placed on primary level English teaching. The scheme covers five main themes and one of them is "enhancing English conversation activities in elementary schools", under which is a strategy towards offering human resources (i.e., native-speaker teachers, secondary English teachers, and people competent in English from local areas or organisations) and also plans for research studies in the field (see Notes [7] for source).

An additional comment about the Round Table on English Language Education Reform. The value placed on English teaching can also be seen in the project entitled "Super English Language High School". This is aimed at producing high school students highly competent in English. In the school year 2002, the project is under experimentation on an individual school basis at 16 selected high schools from 13 prefectures.

#### 4. Social expectations

We have focused so far on MEXT, schools and teachers. For us to investigate more on the social context of primary foreign language provision, it is necessary to deal with the wider social milieu so as to look at people's perceptions and expectations, although the functions and mechanisms of various social factors working on the issue cannot be discussed in this study. At the time of this writing, fragmentary information can be obtained from a small-scaled survey study which was conducted by J. D. Power Asia Pacific in 2000 with regard to parental perceptions on their own proficiency in English and their expectations on formal English teaching at school. What was found in the study, however, should not be taken as a proven generalisation.

The survey involved 160 parents of primary and secondary school students in Tokyo, with the use of telephone interviews. Its results include: 1) as for their own proficiency in English, 75 percent of the respondents chose either "able to do simple things like greeting" or "almost unable to use the language" and 63 percent regarded listening and speaking as their weak points, whereas 6 percent of the respondents affirmed the state of "being able to converse, read and write with no serious problem"; and 2) 63 percent of the 160 parents wished their children acquired a much higher standard, such as competence not only in conversation but also in reading and writing, the need to use English in their children's future work places, and the

communicative standard of the nation in relation to people from other countries which could be improved by English learning. The survey reports that most parents feel that the current English teaching will not be able to create the standard of proficiency as hoped by them. Although the report does not indicate the percentage of the parents, sample elements chosen for educational improvement were focused on “conversation” and “early introduction to English at primary schools”.

## Summary

The present study has worked out three separable phases of the recent development of primary English teaching in Japan: initial local- and school-based offerings since the early 70's; government-assigned exploratory studies since the early 90's; and general provision of English instruction made possible with the implementation of the new Course of Study for Primary Schools. The present state of affairs of foreign language teaching may be described as an embryonic stage within the politically-placed importance of primary English. We cannot capture well enough the future direction, politically, and the way all primary schools in this country will respond to the new possibility of “hands-on learning activities to expose children to foreign languages” in their education.

Under these circumstances, I assume that it is vital, and perhaps necessary, to look into forerunner government-assigned studies and to examine what has actually been thought and done by the teachers involved in those studies. In this context, however, it is necessary to avoid rushing into their overgeneralised implications for general provision of English, in light of the special nature of earlier pilot projects as discussed by Sharpe (2001), more specifically in the Japanese context, the teachers' enthusiasm and the local government's generosity in offering native-speaking teachers.

### Notes on sources for information

\* The asterisk indicates the information is offered in the English language.

- [1] The MEXT website offering the Synopsis of the Report “National Curriculum Standards Reform for Kindergarten, Elementary School, Lower and Upper Secondary School and Schools for the Visually Disabled, the Hearing Impaired and the Otherwise Disabled” (The Curriculum Council, 29 July 1998):  
<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/1998/07/980712.htm>\*
- [2] Statistics from MEXT Lifelong Learning Policy Bureau presented at:  
<http://jin.jcic.or.jp/stat/stats>
- [3] The MEXT website entitled “Promotion of Foreign Language Education”:  
<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/exchange>\*
- [4] Websites offered by the institutional organization Katoh-Gakuen:  
<http://www.katoh-net.ac.jp/Kindergarten/EnglishEd/SokiEng.htm>;  
[http://www.katoh-net.ac.jp/Elementary/e\\_imm.htm](http://www.katoh-net.ac.jp/Elementary/e_imm.htm)\*; and  
[http://www.katoh.net.ac.jp/GyoshuHS/E\\_Bilingual.htm](http://www.katoh.net.ac.jp/GyoshuHS/E_Bilingual.htm)\*
- [5] Information offered by the Hokkaido Board of Education at:  
<http://www.dokyoiprof.hokkaido.jp/hk-stkik/kenshu/ichiran.HTM>
- [6] Transcribed interviews presented by Soikusha :  
<http://www.soiku.co.jp/english/kids/kyoiku/kyoiku>; and  
<http://www.soiku.co.jp/english/kids/kyoiku/kyoiku2>

[7] The MEXT press release entitled “Developing a strategic plan to cultivate ‘Japanese With English Abilities’”:

<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/news/2002/07/020901.htm>\*

The Courses of Study for secondary education:

<http://www.ashi-net.or.jp/nx6h-ykt/CourseStudyLower.html>\*; and

<http://www.ashi-net.or.jp/nx6h-ykt/CourseStudyUpper.html>\*

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