

Behind the Introduction of Foreign Language Education in Japanese Elementary Schools

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Abstract

The official implementation of an elementary school course called “*Gaikokugo*” marked an important milestone in the history of Japanese education. Behind this decision had been the demand for adequate English proficiency among Japanese nationals in the global society. However, the debate over the revision of the content and timing of the start of English language education in Japan did not proceed easily, and there were considerable ideological conflicts over early English language policy. This paper, therefore, overviews the history of foreign language introduction in Japanese elementary schools and discusses how social, political, and ideological factors have contributed to this decision.

【 Key words 】 Foreign Language Education, Foreign Language Activities, English at Elementary Schools, Courses of Study

The early English language education started flourishing in Europe, and quickly gained popularity throughout the world. In Asia, South Korea had a head start in 1997, followed by China and Taiwan in 2001. Compared to these countries, which exercised strong top-down leadership to their decisions, Japan took “careful and slow steps” (Butler, 2007) and it was not until 2020 that a foreign language course was finally introduced in Japanese elementary schools. “Foreign” language education is, effectively “English” language education, which avoids treating English as the only important language that should be introduced in Japanese schools. However, there was considerable debate about whether this course should be a foreign language course or a course on international understanding. In addition, if the course was going to be a language course, then there was not unanimity of opinion on which language should be taught. In order to explain how these complex factors contributed to the realization of the new academic subject, this paper discusses the introduction of foreign language education in Japan with reference to social and political factors, language policies and policy-making processes.

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The implementation of English language education in Japanese elementary schools

The history of English at elementary schools (EES) in Japan dates back to 1986 when the Central Council for Education (CCE), the advisory council for the Ministry of Education (MOE), first made a proposal to revise the timing of the introduction of English language education in Japan (Oshiro & Naoyama, 2008). Since then, Japanese EES has undergone significant changes. In this section, the more than 35-year history of the Japanese EES is discussed, dividing it into four subcategories: (1) the pre-dawn period of the Japanese EES (from the 1980s to 1998), (2) the dawn period (from 1998 to 2008), (3) the start-up period (from 2008 to 2016), and (4) the transitional period (from 2017 to present). To do so, the relevant Courses of Study, the minutes from CCE, and other related official government documents are analyzed. Note that the subcategories adopted here are not official but are named by the author to better explain its history.

Before The Dawn of EES in Japan (From the 1980s to 1998)

In the 1980s, Japan experienced rapid economic growth and joined the global economy. Given the importance of English in global communication, there were calls for sufficient practical communicative competence in English. There followed criticism of traditional grammar based English language teaching because it had not trained expected proficiency among Japanese nationals (Butler, 2007, Yoshida, 2009, among others). In response to these growing needs, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program was launched in the late 1980s, and English-speaking foreign nationals were dispatched to Japanese secondary schools as assistant language teachers. Behind this decision was strong support from Japanese business community, a key stakeholder in education: In 1984, an Ad Hoc CCE convened by the Nakasone cabinet recommended reforms to foreign language education. *Keidanren*, the Japan Business Federation also made a recommendation to incorporate English into the elementary school curriculum (Keidanren, 2000, 2013). Thus began the debate to review the content and timing of the introduction of English education in Japanese schools.

In the 1990s, “globalization” progressed, with the trade of goods, information, money, and people across borders. As a result, the importance of English as a lingua franca was reaffirmed. Meanwhile, MOE introduced an experimental English activity program in 1992, assigning two public elementary schools in Osaka as pilot schools. This pilot case was extended to one school in each prefecture in 1996, with 33 schools participating over the next five years. EES quickly spread throughout the country.

Meanwhile, CCE issued a report titled “21 Seiki wo Tenboushita Wagakuni no Kyoiku no Arikata nitsuite (The Education of Our Country in the 21st Century)” (CCE, 1996) that discussed how Japanese education should be prepared for the twenty first century. The

report suggested introducing foreign language education at elementary schools as a part of the “*Kokusaika* (internationalization)” program that aims to familiarize students with other languages and cultures.

Despite the ideological conflict of “international understanding” versus “English language education,” Japanese version of EES finally set off. In response to this proposal, the Course of Study (CS) was revised in 1998, allowing “foreign language activities” for “international understanding” to be implemented by local governments and individual elementary schools (MEXT, 2012). Although practical aspects such as “*eikaiwa tou* (English conversation or equivalent)” were pointed out, “foreign language activities” remained separate from English language education. This revision of the CS was not officially implemented until 2002, which means that the start of EES in Japan had to wait for the new century.

The Dawn Period (From 1998 to 2008)

With the collapse of the bubble economy in the late 1990s, Japan experienced economic downturn, which required solutions to overcome the causes of its stagnant economy. To boost Japan’s position in the international economy, raising the ability to communicate with foreign nationals was judged to be the most plausible answer. As such, the need to revise English language education in Japan was, once again, widely recognized. In the meantime, the idea of officializing English as Japan’s second language was proposed in the Prime Minister’s Commission on Japan’s Goals in the 21st Century (2000). The report was intended to affirm the country’s fundamental values, present challenges and solutions for the new century, but “the shift to English as an official language did not materialize” (Hashimoto, 2009). In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)* released a plan called, “Developing a Strategic Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’,” followed by a five-year Action Plan (2003). This plan, titled “Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate ‘Japanese with English Abilities’” proposed enhancement of English language education and was implemented immediately (2003-2008). It presented various measures, including specifying the levels of English to be achieved, standardized assessment to measure the above achievement, as well as introducing a listening test in university entrance examinations (MEXT, 2003). At the elementary school level, it was suggested to more utilize personnel with higher English proficiency such as native speakers, or junior high school English teachers, or local residents who are proficient in English. The top-down implementation of this Action Plan required reviewing teacher recruitment and teacher training systems as well as reforming the examination system. At the same time, its bottom-up implementation process remained to be a major challenge. The plan triggered collaborative efforts to develop curriculum, teaching methods and teaching materials at the local level.

*Note: *Monbusyo* (MOE) was renamed *Monbukagakusyo* (MEXT) in 2001.

In 2006, “*Kyoiku Saisei Kaigi* (Education Rebuilding Council),” an advisory body to Prime Minister, was established by then Prime Minister Abe Shinzo. In Japan, the CCE has a history of leading Japanese educational reform. MEXT acknowledged the “Education Rebuilding Council” would perform an examination of education, based on the Prime Minister’s instructions, after which CCE would discuss educational reform (MEXT, 2006). Meanwhile, the CCE and the Curriculum Subcommittee continued discussions for the introduction of English language education at the elementary school level. In the proposal “*Atarashii Jidai no Gimukyoiku wo Sozosuru* (To Create New Compulsory Education in the New Times)” (MEXT, 2005), the enhancement of EES was suggested for the following reasons:

- 93.6 % of elementary schools across the nation provide some form of English education, which needs to be standardized.
- Globalization, the development of information technology, and global issues require international cooperation and global literacy.
- The reported flexibility of children in communicating and learning foreign languages is a strength.

In 2007, the Curriculum Subcommittee examined the EES pilot cases and reached the conclusion that elementary schools need to develop children’s language skills and a positive attitude toward foreign cultures through age appropriate communicative and international activities (MEXT, 2007). It also suggested practical solutions such as introducing English about once a week in “integrated studies” and “special activities” for grades one through four and “*Gaikokugo Katsudo*” for grades five through six (MEXT, 2007).

Following this trend, “*Gaikokugo Katsudo*” was officially included for the first time in the 2008 revision of the CS for elementary schools. This allowed local boards of education or elementary schools to introduce “foreign language activities” at their own discretion as part of the broader goal of enhancing international education, which was officially implemented in 2011.

The Start-up Period (From 2008 to 2016)

Under the new version of the CS in 2008, more than 97% of elementary schools across the nation introduced some form of English language education during the three years of the transition period, according to MEXT (2009). To help elementary school teachers who had not been trained to teach “foreign language activities,” MEXT developed a teaching material titled *Eigo Note* and distributed it to schools across the country to provide a certain level of instruction. (Although it was titled, “foreign” language activities, it was, in reality, “English” language education, as the title of the material suggests.) EES was not an official academic subject at that time; therefore, *Eigo Note* was not regarded as a prescribed

textbook by Article 34 of the School Education Law. Although each school had the discretion to decide whether to use it, *Eigo Note* was used in most of the schools nationwide and was highly evaluated as an informative and helpful teaching aid (Sugiyama, 2018).

In 2011, the Great East Japan Earthquake hit Japan in the middle of its worst and longest economic recession, which adversely affected the Japanese education as well as economy. Although MEXT had been proposing to raise state spending on education to the OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) average level, this was shelved by the Ministry of Finance and the national expenditure on education was reduced. At this time the then ruling Democratic Party of Japan conducted a review of educational policies and decided to abolish *Eigo Note*. As was discussed above, *Eigo Note* was not legally required to be used in EES classrooms, but it had helped elementary school teachers who had not yet officially mastered EES teaching methodologies. The proposed abolition of *Eigo Note* sent shock waves to local governments and schools. However, within a short period of time, MEXT created an inexpensive alternative textbook entitled *Hi, friends!* in the spring of 2012, just before *Eigo Note* was discontinued.

The 2011 Great East Japan Earthquake also brought about changes in the way people think and act. One such example was that people started placing more importance on security and became less willing to take risks. According to “*Global Jinzai Ikusei Jigyō*” (The Council on Promotion of Human Resources for Globalization Development, 2011), “inward-looking attitudes” became more common after the 3-11 earthquake, which led to a decrease in younger people wishing to study abroad or work abroad. As a result, the number of young people studying abroad dramatically plummeted. According to OECD (2013), about 83,000 Japanese students studied abroad in 2004 but this number dropped to 38,535 over the next seven years.

Against this backdrop, the need for adequate English command has, once again, increased and an official government report, “Five Recommendations and Specific Measures for Developing English Proficiency for International Communication” (Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency, 2011) was released in response to meet such need. This report discussed concrete measures to develop English proficiency among Japanese students. They are as follows:

- Proposal 1. English ability required of students – assessment and verification of attainment level
- Proposal 2. Promoting students’ awareness of necessity of English in the global society, and stimulating motivation for English learning
- Proposal 3. Providing students with more opportunities to use English through effective utilization of ALTs, ICT and other means
- Proposal 4. Reinforcement of English skills and instruction abilities of English teachers / Strategic improvement of English education at the level of schools and communities

The introduction of the new academic subject required some kind of teaching/learning support to standardize its instruction across the nation. In this way, a textbook titled *We Can!* was developed by MEXT in 2018. As a general practice, textbooks are produced by textbook companies and screened by MEXT, but when a new subject is established, it does not follow this practice. Thus, *We Can!* was created by MEXT to embody the new curriculum which was used in the upper grades during the two-year transition period. After that, “*Gaikokugo*” textbooks were scheduled to be published by textbook companies and replace *We Can!*. *Let’s Try!* targeted at third grade and fourth grade students was also developed by MEXT in 2018. Unlike *We Can!*, no textbook companies produce replacement materials for *Let’s Try!* since “*Gaikokugo Katsudo*” is not an official subject. MEXT continues to distribute the same material across the nation for middle grade elementary school students.

With the establishment of the new subject, it became necessary to review and update teacher training programs for practicing as well as preparing teachers, since the programs had not been officially standardized previously. EES teacher training had been left to the discretion of individual universities. Therefore, an English language education “core curriculum” was developed by MEXT and Tokyo Gakugei University to ensure a degree of uniformity, which was formulated in 2017. In addition to general knowledge of the subject matter, this curriculum requires elementary school teachers to acquire knowledge of children’s language development, cognitive development, and teaching methods, as well as natural spoken English (Tokyo Gakugei University, 2017). Subsequently, curricula at various universities for the training of teachers of elementary school foreign languages have been revised and updated according to this core curriculum.

Now that teaching materials have been set in place, teacher training programs have been revised based on the standardized curriculum, and elementary foreign language education has been successfully launched. The next goal is to bridge a lack of continuity between elementary school and middle school English education, which remains a problem (MEXT, 2017). There had been no shared comprehensive picture of total English language education in Japan. However, the new version of the CS is characterized by its related goals and objectives from elementary to secondary schools, taking a major step toward its integration.

Now is the time to put this philosophy into practice. Teachers in the same area can share information by exchanging teaching materials, teaching methods and personnel. Creating a consistent English curriculum from elementary to junior high school would be the first step towards achieving consistent English language education. Creating a coherent Can·Do list would also be one way of bridging the gap between schools. Empirical studies at the local level, the accumulation of experiences and their dissemination are expected.

Over the last more than three decades, there have been drastic changes in the field of EES in Japan. This section has provided an overview of its history. The road to an official

implementation of English language education in Japanese elementary schools was not smooth and more challenges are expected in the future. EES in Japan is still young, and continued efforts are expected.

Conclusion

Over the past few decades, English language education in Japan has undergone substantial changes. One such change is the introduction of foreign language in elementary schools, which was implemented in 2017 and officially came into effect nationwide in 2020. Through an overview of this implementation history, this paper has revealed complicated socio-political, economic, and ideological factors interacted with each other.

The implementation of foreign language in Japanese elementary schools is, however, not the goal. It is necessary to build on and refine the practice and disseminate it through teacher training across the country. Working towards these challenges could improve English language education not only at the primary level but also at the secondary and tertiary levels.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether the introduction of foreign language instruction in Japanese elementary schools has contributed to an expected fluency in English for Japanese students. As was discussed, the need to develop Japanese people with a strong command of English was the major drive for the English language education reform in Japan. On the other hand, the objectives of foreign language education articulated in its policy are to broaden students' perspectives through foreign languages and cultures; to enrich students' lives by learning a new language; and to provide an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of Japanese. Unless the objectives set out in the guidelines and those expected by society share the same direction, English language education in Japan may not be able to achieve the expected results, either in terms of English language skills or in terms of a richer language and/or cultural experience.

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「小学校外国語」導入の経緯を概観して

大谷 由布子

【要 旨】 日本の教育史において、公立小学校での「外国語」導入は重要な節目となったが、この決定にいたるまでの道のりは平坦ではなかった。1980年代以降、国際社会で活躍するための十分な英語力の涵養が求められるようになったことを背景に、日本でも英語教育の開始時期を見直す議論が始まったが、社会的な要因や政治・経済的要因等が複雑に関係し、英語教育政策をめぐってイデオロギーの対立が見られた。そこで本稿では、日本の小学校における外国語導入に至った経緯について、近年の学習指導要領や中央教育審議会の議事録、その他関連する政府の公文書等に基づき概観する。

【キーワード】 小学校外国語 外国語活動 小学校英語 学習指導要領