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## THE JAPANESE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEXTS FOR 3<sup>RD</sup> & 4<sup>TH</sup> PRIMARY STUDENTS: STRENGTHENING OR WEAKENING EDUCATION?

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### Abstract

This paper will discuss the new English texts for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year Japanese primary school students and the dilemma it is causing among instructors and administrators. Previously, there was much discussion and debate by government officials, local school boards and teachers themselves as to the need for English instruction at the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade level. Japan lags most other Asian countries when it comes to overall English language abilities even though it is a required subject for junior and senior high school students. This has proven to be a negative factor when it comes to international business and other dealings on a global basis. From April 2020, a new curriculum will be introduced that encompasses 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade Japanese students in a more structured English language setting. These additional classes have come at the cost of a reduction or alteration with the instruction of other core subjects such as Japanese, math or science. Due to the common knowledge that there are so many hours in a school day, the addition of English classes will require the reduction of other subject's mater to stay within the allotted school time. This is a common problem among many countries that are trying to add or have already added English language instruction to their core study base. This paper; therefore, will elaborate on how the new text 'Let's Try' is being implemented into classroom usage. Schools need to maintain a balance among other school subjects while at the same time finding time for government mandated English classes.

**Keywords:** English, Japan, Language Education, Primary School .

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### 1. Introduction

Japan has been altering and adjusting its primary school curriculum since the late '80's to adapt to a more global community. The driving force behind this was the economic boon time of the 1980's. It was commonly referred to as the 'bubble economy' due to the fact that in later years, it did burst, there began a realization that Japan needed to foster stronger speakers of the English language. This was necessary to compete on a global stage where the language of business between many countries and international corporations is English. Japan had repeatedly been criticized for its lack of English communication abilities in this area. Since the end of WWII, the Japanese education ministry has been issuing various guidelines as to the direction that education in Japan should be taking. In 1989, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) introduced the 'Course of Study Guidelines (CoG's) for Modern English Languages' which stated specifically that English should be emphasized in schools. Since there were no specific policies though, many schools and administrations at the local level interpreted these CoG's in very different ways. This timeframe coincided with the introduction of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program which is aimed at promoting

grass-roots international exchange between Japan and other nations (JET a, n.d). JET participants teach alongside the Japanese Teachers of English (JTE's) in primary, junior and senior high schools. Currently, there are almost 6000 individuals from over 57 countries serving in this paid position (JET b, n.d). The addition of native English speakers in areas of Japan that had never really seen or interacted with foreigners before other than Allied soldiers caused initial problems, but these were mostly due to lack of English/Japanese language skills by either or both the JET participant and the JTE. Browne and Wada (1998, p 106) state that 'before [the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme] most students and teachers... had never seen a foreigner beyond television or the movies, much less had a chance to use English as a tool for communication' (Browne and Wada, 1998). Additionally, culture differences were encountered and continue to play a role, but since the JET program is now past its 30<sup>th</sup> year, many Japanese teachers have fostered a closer understanding on how to work with JET's. With the increase in English lessons there will be a huge demand for those already competent in the language. An article in the Japan Times states that about 144,000 are expected to be needed by 2020 (Aoki, 2016). An increase in the number of English teachers is quite understandable and quite necessary. Given that English at elementary schools alone will raise by 400% does the government plan on recruiting ALTs (Assistant Language Teachers) to sate this demand, or does it plan to make do with the current numbers? (MEXT, nd.). Adversely, some educators and Japanese scholars have been adamantly against the communication-based approach that English education has been centered around for the past 30 years or so. Yoshifumi Saito (2017), a scholar of English literature and English education, also severely criticizes communication-based English education, claiming that it can contribute only to the mass-production of low-grade learners as well as the development of Japanese society as a cultural colony (Saito, 2017).

Since 2000, MEXT has taken a strong interest in the effects of globalization, and this has influenced MEXT's perspective on Japanese education (Sherlock, 2016). The organization and publication of an English text at the primary level was finally realized in 2011. Heated debate had taken place in the highest level of MEXT for almost 20 years. Numerous educators thought that the day would never come. Looking back now though, the initial publication of an English text has been a major catalyst in the ever expanding debate on English education in Japan. Beginning at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade level, English education will formally be extended down to the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grades. In 2011, it started with the 'Eigo Note'.

As per direction from MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) also formally known as the MOE (Ministry of Education) English will be taught to all 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders on a weekly basis from April 2011. The weekly instruction will be accomplished through the use of a text/notebook; - thus the title 'Eigo Note' (Harry, 2009).

After all the fanfare though the 'Eigo Note' was only used for a brief amount of time before it was replaced with another text entitled 'Hi Friends', again aimed toward the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade students. While there were many criticisms with both sets of texts one of the main complaints was that while English was presented in an enjoyable way with songs, chants, and games, once students moved from primary to junior high school the language and classroom requirements were shockingly different. In Japan, junior high school courses at the that level are all geared toward passing senior high school entrance exams whereas senior high school classes are aimed toward the university exams. The apparent mix-match between primary and junior high English lessons has always been glaringly obvious. While primary school lessons had a bit of fun and excitement to them the junior high school English lessons continued to be a bore for a large majority of learners. The additional two years of English at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade level did not prove to infuse any extra language ability and for many students may have done the opposite. The usage of 'Hi Friends' has been ongoing now for almost 6 years with mixed results.

## **Let Try**

The title of the text for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade students is called 'Let's Try'. It includes improvements over the previous texts of 'Hi Friends'. As one current Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) stated:

The activities are simpler, easier to explain to the students without having to revert to Japanese and designed around starting with single word responses. The books then build out to answering in full sentences before finally being able to converse and exchange questions and answers using their own vocabulary inputs (Carrigan, 2019).

There are a variety of ways to teach language at this age and since the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders will not be assigned letter or numerical marks for these lessons, it's all in fun. Instructors are free to choose the method that they feel is appropriate for their class. They can use any number of approaches; use of physical movement, chants and songs, games, competitions (without losers), and encourage positive efforts (Stenson and Nakahara, 2001). Children are different from adults in terms of attention span. It is said that children have a short attention span for about five to ten minutes (Triana, 2017).

## **We Can**

Another change in the way English will be taught in Japan from April 2020 is that from that time English language lessons will begin to be graded for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year students. Whereas in the past, it has all been viewed as a fun, and hopefully, at times, an engaging lesson, now it will be a marked course. The addition of grade will require more classes to allow for instructors to evaluate their students. This will double the annual number of English classroom hours to 70 from the current 35, and see reading and writing taught for the first time (Aoki, 2016). In practical terms, this means that 小4 and 小3 classes will have English at least once a week, while 小6 and 小5 will have English around two or three times a week, as of 2020 (MEXT, n.d). Regardless of which text if any is utilized, the addition of more classes into an already busy schedule for both students and teachers will be stressful. As is most often the case when something is added then likewise something must be subtracted to maintain balance and order. This is the dilemma that is currently taking place in Japanese primary schools. The schools cannot be lengthened as students need time for other activities outside of school.

## **Teacher Training**

A necessary component of all these changes in educational policies is that of teacher training. Each time a new English text is issued there are key revisions in format and the way the information needs to be presented and shared with the learners. Although MEXT has provided training for teachers, researchers have found that there is the need for more training programs and support for teachers (Tahira, 2012.).Nishino (2011) stresses;

the importance of opportunities for teacher development where teachers can continuously learn from their colleagues. She explains that these opportunities are essential as it can take a considerable amount of time for teachers to switch to new ways of teaching, to accumulate experience in using communicative approaches, and at the same time, to overcome obstacles and constraints including class size and pressure from the grammar-translation-centered university entrance examination system.

Due to the fact that the overall educational system is geared toward passing the university entrance examinations which generally do not have any oral English component, students who do develop some English language skills at a young age will most likely lose them as they progress through junior and senior high school. Only in rare cases, such as in some private

senior high schools that have particular language tracts of study do Japanese students excel in English and other languages such as Chinese or Korean.

On average though, most primary grade instructors do not possess English language skills themselves and do not have the capabilities to teach it.

Unlike secondary school teachers of English, elementary school teachers have not been required to reach any levels of English proficiency in such tests as TOEIC and Eiken Step Test, except for the criteria used by some prefectures for their yearly examinations to employ full-time elementary school teachers

(Kawase, 2011).

Teacher training is not only useful, but it is a necessity for smooth lessons to transpire at even the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade levels. Since the homeroom teacher is the main educator for their assigned class, adequate teaching training in language acquisition is a must. These homeroom teachers are certified in teaching at elementary school but they are not certified to teach English (Fukushima, 2018).

According to an education ministry survey in fiscal 2015, only 4.9 percent of elementary school teachers were licensed to teach English. Many didn't even learn how to teach the subject because it wasn't necessary to acquire their teaching licenses. The government started providing special training in fiscal 2014 to develop about 1,000 expert English teachers by fiscal 2018 who can train fellow teachers. But observers say that number is far from sufficient, considering that about 144,000 English teachers are expected to be needed by 2020 (Aoki, 2016).

As the need for proficient English speakers is growing the added necessity of Japanese English language teachers is not being met. An additional fact that is not mentioned, but it is quite common in many countries is the reality that many teachers rotate from grade to grade over the years so that a teacher who is involved with 1<sup>st</sup> graders this year may be switched to a higher grade next year that imposes the use of English in some of the lessons. It has almost become a requirement now in Japan that primary school teachers have a working knowledge of English to function properly in the school environment.

### **Conclusion**

Globalization has shown us the many similarities we have when it comes to needs and necessities for life. One difference that we have not been able to overcome is that of many countries and regions differing languages. One way that the area of business has solved this has been by trying to use one unifying language to conduct transactions. While in the past it may have been Greek or Roman, today it is English. This means that countries such as Japan, where Japanese is prevalent, must require its populace to engage in English language lessons to become satisfactory communicators. At what age second language acquisition should commence is beyond the scope of this paper. In Japan, it has been formally directed that public primary schools formally begin these lessons in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Children are quick at understanding new concepts when presented in a positive, engaging way (Stenson and Nakahara, 2001). This means the insertion of additional lesson times to a daily study routine that is already congested. In 2020, the number of mandatory English lessons at elementary school will more than quadruple compared to the number of lessons required by law in 2017 (MEXT, n.d).

This brief paper has addressed numerous glaring inefficiencies in the direction of English language lessons at the primary school level. Amongst them are the number of actual instructors required to conduct English lessons for 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> grade on a weekly or more basis, the feasibility of actual material used in the lessons and the varying English language abilities of the

Japanese homeroom teachers. Additionally, it has not been candidly addressed as how these additional classes will be fit into an already tight schedule. As April, 2020 rapidly approaches there seems to be a fundamental detachment between MEXT in Tokyo and those local instructors in the classrooms. The solutions and answers to these problems are not easy to fix. The issue of lack of English language abilities for Japanese teachers for example is something that may take years to solve if indeed MEXT is committed to truly emphasizing the importance of English language learning commencing at the primary school level.



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