

Are they ready? On the verge of compulsory English, elementary school teachers lack confidence

Keywords

homeroom teachers, confidence, support, teacher training

All fifth and sixth grade elementary school teachers in Japan will soon be responsible for weekly English lessons in their classrooms. According to a survey conducted in Tokushima, few of these teachers feel confident about their ability to speak or teach English. These teachers will need more time, more training and a well-developed support network if they are going to be able to provide their students with inspiring English classes.

日本の小学校5、6年生を担当するすべての教師はもうすぐ、毎週英語を教えることになる。徳島で行われた調査によれば、英語を話したり教えたりする能力に自信がある教師はわずかしかない。彼らが啓発的な英語の授業を児童に提供するためには、より多くの時間とトレーニング、そして充実した支援ネットワークが必要になるだろう。

Mark Fennelly

Shikoku University

Robert Luxton

Shikoku University

In anticipation of mandatory elementary school English classes beginning in 2011, a survey was given to teachers at a recent English teaching seminar in Tokushima to ascertain, among other things, their confidence regarding teaching English to their young students. The results showed that very few of the teachers involved felt confident enough to begin teaching English. As all fifth and sixth grade teachers will soon be responsible for English lessons, this is a significant problem. It was also found that a large number of teachers were unsure of the Ministry of Education's (MEXT) goals for the program. For these reasons, we feel it is the responsibility of university education departments, who are both educating new teachers and training existing teachers to teach English, to make a greater effort in bridging this confidence gap and in conveying more precisely the goals of the new program.

This paper will provide a brief history of efforts to begin English education at the elementary level, explain why homeroom teachers will be responsible for English classes, and then discuss several problems that our survey brought to light, including some misunderstandings about the course book, *Eigo Note*.

Background

Whether English should be taught at the elementary level or not has been a controversial subject in Japan, with many in the government and schools abjectly against it. (Yukio Otsu, who has written several books—listed in the references—arguing against the implementation of English at the elementary level, is a well-known opponent. He believes once-a-week classes taught by non-specialists are a waste of time.) To avoid undue conflict, the Ministry of Education proceeded with its implementation cautiously and slowly, first setting up pilot schools in Osaka in 1992 and then, over the following four years, in all of the other prefectures. These schools identified numerous problems, among them that homeroom teachers lacked English ability and English teaching skills (Fennelly, 2007, p.93).

The next major step towards broad implementation came in 2002 with the introduction of the period of integrated studies. Integrated studies classes had a fairly loosely defined goal, which was to increase “zest for living” by engaging students in problem solving activities and applying knowledge attained across the curriculum (MEXT, 2001, p.121). It was under the umbrella of international understanding that English activities were first introduced.

As English activities spread throughout Japanese elementary schools, a major problem became evident: English classes among different elementary schools, even those within the same junior high school catchment area, varied greatly, which made teaching English at the junior high level difficult. Clearly, more consistency in content and teaching hours was necessary. MEXT responded to these problems with an outline for a new course of study in 2008, which prescribed uniform, once-a-week Foreign Language (English) Activity classes for fifth and sixth grade students. Teaching materials, including *Eigo Note*, were developed, along with a guide for in-service training. An important part of the new guidelines was that homeroom teachers would be responsible for these new classes.

Homeroom teachers teaching English

Many have wondered why homeroom teachers, few of whom are proficient English speakers,

will be in charge of English, whereas subjects such as music are often taught by specialists. It is possible that a lack of funding may be one reason, as the cost of hiring English-speaking teachers for every school in the country would be extremely expensive. (The annual budget for implementing English nationwide was only around 2 billion yen in 2008.) However, MEXT claims the reason is that homeroom teachers are the best prepared to implement this program because they are the most familiar with their students' needs (Matsukawa & Oshiro, 2008, p.37). The government also believes that having homeroom teachers teach English Activities will help to keep the focus on communication rather than language acquisition. The reasoning for this is that English at the elementary school level is not going to be an official subject, like music, which would require an official textbook, tests, numerical evaluation and a qualified teacher. Instead, it is going to simply be a class, along the lines of moral education. Planners have long lamented that whereas all English education in Japan is intended to be communicative, it has in fact become entrance exam-oriented and highly dependent on rote learning. According to the government, having homeroom teachers in charge of English education instead of specialists may help to avoid this.

Not all teachers will have to teach English by themselves. In many cases, they will be assisted by either foreign native-speakers (ALTs) or by “local experts,” people from the community who will hopefully be good English speakers. However, this has not necessarily quelled the anxiety among teachers for a number of reasons. First, many individual school boards are unsure if they have the financial resources to hire assistants (the board of education for Tokushima City has chosen to ask volunteers to come in from the community to help teach, a strategy that certainly carries a measure of risk), and second, Japanese teachers are transferred frequently between grades and schools, so no one is really sure if they will be teaching English in the near future or not.

The survey

At a recent English teaching seminar in Tokushima, 147 elementary school teachers were

given a survey to assess their general sentiments about teaching English. (Representatives of each elementary school in Tokushima were present at the seminar, although not all participated in the survey.) Survey items were based on initial surveys done in 1997 and 2007. In 1997, a survey was given to all teachers at the pilot school for English education in Tokushima, Shinmachi Elementary School. This, in turn, became the basis of a survey of the 50 pilot schools across Japan. In 2008, similar items were used for a survey of elementary school teachers in Tokushima City. The items on all three surveys concentrated mainly on objective criteria such as the number of classes taught by homeroom teachers, the number of hours given to English teaching and teacher training needs. Each survey also had a section for comments, the answers to which were revealing. The 2008 survey, in particular, showed a lack of confidence among teachers, with many comments mentioning a lack of English ability, a lack of knowledge in how to use the course book, *Eigo Note*, and questions about how to plan forty-five minute English classes.

Comments on the earlier surveys led us to believe that confidence was a serious and continuing problem among elementary school teachers regarding the teaching of English, and with this in mind, we decided to ask teachers more directly about their confidence levels. The first part of the latest survey concerned general objective criteria such as the number of English classes being taught and needs analysis for teacher training. The second part, with twelve items, was subjective and asked teachers about their confidence, problems in classes, use of the new course book and knowledge about teaching a foreign language. (An English translation of this part of the survey can be found in the appendix.)

A lack of confidence related to both English level and the ability to teach English was perhaps the most obvious finding. Of the 147 teachers surveyed, only 9% said they were confident in their English teaching abilities, and 72% of respondents said that their English ability was not sufficient to teach English. Sixty-nine percent of the teachers surveyed said that they did not have enough knowledge of how to teach English.

Another significant finding of our survey was the need for more training. In particular, neither the curriculum nor the guidebook seemed to be well understood. For example, only 20% of the teachers surveyed claimed to have a good understanding of the new course of study. Similarly, only 30% said they had confidence in using *Eigo Note*. A lack of understanding of the curriculum and course book can obviously lead to very serious problems in the future, and both signal the need for further training.

Our survey also showed that over 30% of teachers were concerned that their team-teaching classes are not going well. Although 30% may not seem significant enough to raise concern, comments from teachers lead us to believe that the problem may be greater than this number suggests. In particular, teachers expressed concern about their ability to communicate with ALTs and about a lack of time for preparing and discussing team-taught classes.

Little time for training and not enough time to prepare for team-teaching classes are part of a larger issue: elementary teachers in Japan already feel overworked. We asked the teachers about this specifically. Tellingly, only 2% said that they disagreed with the statement "teaching English in my classroom is too much of a burden." Japanese elementary school teachers are responsible for everything from classes and extra-curricular activities to cleaning and even the students' lives at home. English classes are an unwelcome burden for many.

Overall, our survey results were not encouraging. The teachers clearly lack confidence when it comes to speaking and teaching English, they do not seem to understand the new curriculum very well, and even without English Activity classes added to the schedule, they feel overworked.

Eigo Note

As mentioned above, only about 30 percent of the teachers surveyed said they felt they were using *Eigo Note* effectively. As many teachers had already had as long as two years to become familiar with the book, this low number can probably be attributed to the fact that *Eigo Note* is unlike most other English textbooks. Its goal is not in fact English ability, but the ability to communicate. In the new program, English

becomes a tool to teach students how to communicate in general. As stated by MEXT, the goal of the new program is to “form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing an understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages” (MEXT, 2009, chap. 4). Rather than the concrete goals connected to vocabulary and grammar that most teachers are familiar with, the new goals stress experience, attitude and communication.

In particular, experts involved in designing the course and book stress one facet of communicative competence known as strategic competence (Oshiro & Naoyama, 2008), which is essentially the ability to compensate when one does not know a specific word or phrase through re-phrasing, gestures and so on (Savignon, 1983). This is meant to improve communication in general as well as create the groundwork for the later acquisition of discourse and grammatical competence. A communicative experiential approach and strategic competence are not concepts that many teachers are familiar with, and it is possible that this is what has led to the teachers’ lack of confidence in using *Eigo Note*. It is our opinion that a lack of understanding regarding the main course book for a new program of study clearly implies that additional training is necessary.

Suggestions for the future

Universities that are now training the elementary school teachers of the future need to take into account that English has become part of the curriculum. New courses in education need to be developed that cover these new areas of knowledge and ability, and indeed, many such courses have already been developed around the country. We see two problems at the moment. The first is that, because English Activities is not an official subject at the elementary level, related English teaching classes at universities are often elective, which means that students who are uncomfortable with English can avoid them. It is therefore up to individual universities to encourage their students to take part in English

teaching classes. The second problem involves the training that these students are receiving. Teacher trainers at the university level have a responsibility to understand the new course of study and prepare students accordingly. Many teacher trainers do not seem to understand the MEXT goals adequately and are putting emphasis on the teaching of English rather than developing a communicative experience for students. Those involved have a duty to truly understand the goals.

Perhaps a bigger problem concerns teachers who are already in the field. As mentioned, most teachers are already very busy, which makes additional training difficult to accomplish, and funding for training is decreasing. Many of the teachers concerned have already received 30 hours of English teaching training, but as our survey showed, this was in many cases insufficient. What is necessary, therefore, is a better support network, one that will offer ongoing training and support for teachers who need it. One of the best ideas for this, we believe, is the development of links between local schools, boards of education and universities.

At our own school, Shikoku University, a volunteer support program has been established through links with local universities and boards of education both as a means of training future teachers to teach English Activities according to the new curriculum and also as a means of supporting current homeroom teachers. Both English majors and education majors have been visiting local elementary schools during English Activities classes and working as assistants, and the results have been promising. Other universities in Japan, such as Tokai, Sophia and Waseda, are having success with similar programs.

Where confidence is lacking, experience, practice and training are crucial. Classes observed in Okinawa, where English Activities began seven years ago, are proceeding noticeably better than what was seen in Tokushima. Okinawa schools have a well-developed system for support and training and the teachers seem more confident.

Conclusion

Although our survey showed that most teachers lacked confidence in their English abilities, asked whether their students seemed to be enjoying

the classes or not, most teachers said yes, which is encouraging. Perhaps even more encouraging is that some of the English lessons conducted by homeroom teachers that we have observed over the last two years have been very well done. The teaching was confident, the students were engaged, and the atmosphere was fun. On the other hand, where teachers lacked training and confidence, students seemed to have a much less positive attitude toward English classes.

English will soon be mandatory in all Japanese elementary schools. Many teachers are not confident, they are already overworked, and funding for training is decreasing. Teachers are unsure of the goals and how to use the new course book, and they do not know whether they will have an assistant or not. These are serious obstacles that need to be overcome. However, we believe that additional training and well-organized support networks will make teachers more confident, as was seen in Okinawa, and that confident elementary homeroom teachers are capable of teaching inspiring English lessons to their students and improving student motivation to communicate using English.

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Appendix

- Do you think that foreign-language-activity classes are proceeding without problems?
- Do you understand the new English course of study well?
- Do you have confidence in teaching English?
- Are you using Eigo Note effectively?
- Is your school's support of English activities satisfactory?
- Are students reacting well to English classes?
- Do you think English in elementary school will have a positive effect on attitudes towards English?
- Do you have an effective relationship with the ALTs and JTEs in your classroom?

- Is your English ability sufficient to teach English classes?
- Do you have enough knowledge of how to teach a foreign language?
- Are you in favor of introducing foreign language activities to elementary schools?
- Do you think it is too much of a burden on teachers to teach English in elementary schools?

Mark Fennelly taught English at the elementary and junior high school level for over 15 years in Egypt and Japan before joining the faculty of Shikoku University in 2004. For the past seven years he has been responsible for teacher training classes related to elementary and



kindergarten English for English and education majors. He has been involved in teacher training for elementary school teachers for many years and supports prefectural and municipal training workshops locally. His research interests include teacher development, task-based approach and curriculum development.

Robert Luxton has been teaching at Shikoku University for 12 years and at its affiliated kindergarten for six. He has also been a guest teacher at local elementary schools. He has a M.Ed. in elementary education and a Master of Applied Linguistics. His research interests are elementary education, stylistics and literature.



Scattered Leaves

I recently assigned a teaching story to a second year class of education students. It was one of those vexing Zen stories whose meaning keeps slipping through your fingers like a live eel. It was about a young monk who loved to tend his temple garden.

One day he took special care to manicure his garden impeccably for some special guests expected later that day. An old master from the neighboring temple watched him intently. When the young monk was sitting back to admire his finished work, the old priest told him the garden was missing something and offered to set it right for him. The young man, with some hesitation and much curiosity, helped him over the fence. The old man proceeded straight to the great tree at the center of the garden and shook it vigorously, sending leaves raining down over everything. "There, that's better," he said finally. The young monk stood there helplessly, his mouth gaping.

My students drew many lessons from this story. Some thought it was about the difference in the beauty made by man and that created by nature. Others thought it was about the folly of making an effort only for special occasions. Each student projected her own values and experiences onto the story to give it meaning. So did I.

I thought of the times in my teaching career where my garden seemed all clean and tidy. At one time, for example, I was convinced that the best path to oral fluency was oral practice. It seemed to make sense. After all, oral expression is a physical act and, as such, it is subject to the law of specificity. If the best training for a swimmer is swimming then surely the best training for a speaker is speaking. I taught speaking through oral practice and I taught with confidence.

Then I conducted research to assess oral fluency in several elementary school English classes that were taught using my speaking centered approach. Among these classes, one had received an extra session of listening input instead

of speaking practice because I got a lesson plan mixed up. It became an accidental experiment, comparing oral practice to listening input in developing speaking ability. Unexpectedly, the listeners turned out to be better speakers than those who received more oral practice. Leaves everywhere, and the old man disappeared over the fence.

Needless to say I became a disciple of input. Soon, teaching was easy as before and I was so self-assured, until the old man showed up and shook my tree, again. I've gotten used to that old man. I look forward to his visits now—for those times, when I'm standing in a pile of leaves, my mouth gaping, is when I grow.

I still try to keep a neat garden but I think I spend more time watching it and less time working it, knowing the garden changes and I change with it.

Teaching, learning and growing are not processes plural; they are one process, a social process. In our teaching community, we learn from our colleagues and from our experience with students; we teach each other our discoveries and difficulties, and we grow through the feedback and support of our peers.

So, I invite you to join the process of Teaching, Learning, and Growing at JALT2011. Submit your proposal by April 22 and take advantage of this opportunity to communicate your experience, share your findings, and be part of one of the largest language teacher conferences in Asia. Remember we are open to a variety of formats—from poster sessions to workshops to formal presentations.

—Stan Pederson, JALT2011 Conference Chair

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