

# Maximizing the Newly Mandated English Instruction in Elementary Schools

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## Abstract

In April, 2011, the new curriculum mandate began to be fully implemented across the country under the name of “English Activities” in the category of Foreign Language Activities in the Course of Study for the elementary schools (Chapter 4). With the introduction of English instruction in the Ryoiki area, which is characterized as a curriculum program item not to be letter-graded in terms of evaluation in the primary schools, the country has to grapple with many challenges. The topics to be discussed in this paper include team-teaching, specifically involving an assistant language teacher (ALT) from English-speaking countries, pre-service teacher training, and in-service teacher training in light of the implementation of the newly-mandated “English activities” at the grade school level. These topics are all inter-related matters to realize the goals of the new curriculum item. In this paper, the author argues that the budget money spent on the ALTs should be better spent in a way that practicing teachers and teacher trainees at college have opportunities to be better trained in order for those people to become full-fledged teachers.

In addition, when the new framework of education is in place and pre-service programs and in-service professional development programs are overhauled, new recruits and practicing teachers who have received adequate pedagogy and training will become the ones who can invigorate the new curriculum program, complying with the expectations from the stakeholders and maximize the foreign language instruction in the elementary schools.

To this end, MEXT should make a decision to rectify the topmost laws relating to teaching licensure, which will expedite the establishment of the crucial courses of teaching English

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in the grade school level with respect to the higher educational institutions, at which teacher education is, in principle, to be exercised in Japan.

## **Introduction**

### **Background of team-teaching models with native speakers of English**

In 1986 the Ministry of Education recognized the necessity to reexamine the starting year of English education in terms of early introduction which was first referred to by the report of an advisory body to Prime Minister, Nakasone Yasuhiro (Hayashi, 2007). The report suggested that English education in junior and senior high schools focused on too much grammatical knowledge and the domain of reading, thus English education should be shifted to enhancing students' practical English competence. In addition, the panel recommended that the introduction of English as a second language should be extended down to elementary schools. This policy making was propelled by the strong influence of business and economic leaders. From the perspective of industrial competitiveness, the shortage of English language skills of new recruits was a matter of their very survival in the global competition (Aspinall, 2003). Global economic players in Japan needed employees whose English language skills allowed them to communicate and cope with economic activities effectively in the world arena. Therefore, the proposed shift away from long-established grammar-translation curriculum practice towards teaching for communicative competence was the response to the economic motive as well as internationalization which began to be chanted as a buzz word during this period nationwide.

In this framework was the inception of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program. In the midst of the heyday of the bubble economy, Japan's annual trade surplus to the U.S. increased to \$ 50 billion, causing intensified conflict with the United States in the mid-1980s (McConnel, 2000). The proposal of the Japan Exchange and Teaching Program was presented in order to rectify the imbalance of the flow of goods and personnel as well as open up the Japanese system (McConnel, 2000). McConnel (as cited in Dais, 2004, p. 93) notes that the JET program was instituted "as a gift to the American delegation at a summit between Ronald Reagan and Yasuhiro Nakasone, and a concession to the US government", eventually inviting university graduates from the United States and other English speaking countries in 1987. The goals of their arrival were "to foster international perspectives by promoting international exchange at local levels as well as to intensify foreign language education (ibid)." Thus, the native speakers of English through the JET program appeared constantly in the public education system, following the Monbusho English Fellow scheme in 1977 and the British English Teaching program in 1978 (Collins,2006).

### **In the context of elementary schools**

Since then, team teaching has been widely practiced at the secondary school level across the country. At the elementary school level, meanwhile, a new experiment of teaching English in public elementary schools in Osaka officially was initiated in 1992 (Allen-Tamai, 2010). In this context, several forms of English instruction termed as English Conversation, English Activity, as well as English class had been experimented with, specifically, in the privileged elementary schools designated by the Ministry of Education (now the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology (MEXT); its official abbreviation from 6 January 2001) and other municipalities in order to assess the research-based curricula. In this experimental process of English instruction in the schools, a few team-teaching models emerged in light of the character of elementary school teachers to be noted later. The typical models were (are) as follows: class undertaken by a homeroom teacher (HRT) and an assistant language teacher (ALT); a HRT and a Japanese teacher of English as well as a HRT; a HRT, a local Japanese person proficient in English and an ALT. In addition, frequency of the language class varied nationwide. There was disparity in the experimental curriculum implementation from one school to another in regions across the country.

One of the central government's policies in education is to provide the same quality of education to the people in formal education nationwide. Under the principle of equal opportunities in education, in 2006 the subcommittee of Central Education Council proposed the plan that English instruction at the elementary school level should be officially included in the school curriculum. Consequently, MEXT made an announcement on the 26th of March, 2008, that the English language instruction in grades five and six at the primary school level should be included in the curriculum. As such, English instruction was prescribed in the Course of Study curriculum guidelines for elementary schools as a Ryoiki area of study, which is characterized as a curriculum program item not to be letter-graded in terms of evaluation.

### **Guidelines for the Course of Study for the elementary school level**

In the Course of Study curriculum guidelines for the elementary school level promulgated in 2008, MEXT states that HRTs or specialist teachers of English should conduct the class in principle. In addition, considering the circumstances below, the curriculum guidelines state that the class can be undertaken with the assistance of a local volunteer who is proficient in English and can include the involvement of an ALT. As is widely noted as a rationale, the commitment of the ALT in class could contribute to raising inter-cultural awareness among students. In the meantime, the Japanese assistant or accredited Japanese teacher of English in class is mainly sought in light of the fact that elementary school teachers are not well-prepared for teaching English in a solo fashion. At present, English instruction at the elementary level is being undertaken in the various styles of

delivery models as noted above.

Under these circumstances, after the two-year transitional period of curriculum shift, in April, the starting month of the academic calendar 2011, the new curriculum mandate began to be fully implemented across the country under the name of “English Activities” in the category of Foreign Language Activities in the Course of Study for the elementary schools (Chapter 4). With the introduction of English instruction in the Ryoiki area in the primary schools, the country has to grapple with many challenges: the scarcity of teachers who have had professional training in teaching English at the elementary school level (-according to the data MEXT released (2009), only 3.7% of elementary school teachers, that is, only one out of twenty-five teachers has an English teaching certificate for junior high school.), namely how to conduct pre-service and in-service teacher training; how to maximize the foreign language teaching to measure up to the students’ needs and parents’ expectations.

### **Team-teaching delivery model and ALTs**

A team-teaching delivery model is a joint enterprise in the classroom, specifically in the case of a team-taught class involving an ALT, each member of the team bringing a different cultural model to the class. Students receive and respond to the instructor’s actions reciprocally. This produces, beyond the model of solo-teaching, the dynamic interaction between the teacher and the pupil as well as among learners, helping the learners to appreciate the sense of cultures and languages, and making the learners acquire what MEXT intends to do in the new mandate.

Currently several types of ALTs are engaging in teaching English in the Japanese public school system. The JET Program was a main source of providing ALTs for team-taught classes in the formal education in Japanese. Tight budgetary issues are commonly shared so that the cities and municipalities as employers have been changing the practice of hiring ALTs from using the government-funded JET program to using recruitment agencies. Around 25 % of the ALTs are now JET-ALTs, and almost the rest of the ALTs are dispatched by the recruitment agencies to the elementary schools and junior high schools. Deregulation initiatives were undertaken by the Japanese government to rejuvenate the downturns entailing the perpetual recession of the Japanese economy. As such, the wave of accelerated deregulation encroached on the education field in Japan. ALT dispatch companies began to flourish in the market around the year 2006 when the early introduction of English in elementary schools became a real possibility (Yomiuri Shinbun newspaper, 2009).

When an ALT is hired through the JET program, each hiring entity has to cough up the total cost of ¥ five million nine thousand for an ALT per annum (Kamitani, 2009), while each city and municipality can recruit a full-time ALT independently from the government-funded JET program,

with less of an expenditure of ¥ three million six thousand after taxes per annum. Other sources cities and municipalities rely on are the recruitment agencies (dispatch companies), which supply the ALTs with far lower costs (Martin, 2010). A large part of ALTs in the country consist of the ones through recruitment companies (MEXT, 2010). Among the ALTs through recruitment agencies are subcontracted ALTs. The subcontracting system in education is a new kind of social apparatus created in the process of deregulating the system in the Japanese context. There is a debate as to whether or not the subcontracting is an appropriate practice in procuring the language assistants, whereas this practice is deemed illegitimate in terms of the labor-related laws.

The cities and municipalities facing the budgetary constraints have attempted to trim the cost, which leads to the negative consequences in the teaching venues as follows:

When using subcontracted ALTs, the two educators [a HRT and an ALT] do not speak to each other ... teachers are not permitted to directly instruct their assistants. ... the school opted for the safest approach: banning all conversation between teachers and ALTs during class. (Daily Yomiuri newspaper on line, 2010, Aug 19).

The key features to be demonstrated in the class involving people with the differing cultural identities include committed interactions with all the participants in class to attain the goal of the new curriculum in the elementary schools.

### **Integration is key to successful team-teaching with ALTs**

To capitalize on the investment in ALTs, it is crucial that they are fully integrated into the teaching community in each school. This integration of ALTs creates a collegial ambience in each classroom and teachers' office, ultimately enabling them to fully exert their potentials in the class.

McConnell (cited in Davis, 2004, p. 96) maintains that most ALTs, especially from the JET program "do not have any experience teaching in the Japanese public education system" prior to their arrival, and that "approximately ninety percent of ALTs do not hold a degree in education." ALTs have culturally and cognitively differing experience in their countries so that their familiarization with English instruction in the Japanese context is the top priority when engaging in educational activities. Course offerings for the young people from abroad such as Foreign Language Teaching theory and pedagogy in the EFL context would be preferable.

In addition, the workshops for ALTs should be provided focusing on assisting them to acquire the basic manipulative skills of Japanese, if necessary, for the sake of lesson planning and feedback sessions as well as the chance for easy access from and to Japanese elementary school teachers in general. ALTs' knowledge of Japanese ameliorates the uneasiness of Japanese elementary school teachers who are not specialty teachers of English but generalist teachers and serves to build amicable relationships with each other school-wide.

## Discussion

### Pre-service teacher training

Under the current Ordinance for Enforcement of the Teachers' License Act, 1998, prospective teachers in teacher training programs for the elementary school level have to complete the following subject areas including specialty subjects, and professional-development focused subjects. Other requirements include the Japanese Constitution, Information Technology literacy and "Communication in a foreign language" (Article 66[-6] in the above Ordinance), which are commonly applied to the grade school level, junior high and senior high school level credential programs.

"Communication in a foreign language" stipulated in the above Ordinance, which is included as part of the college/university graduation programs in most institutions, does not suffice for the need of the prospective elementary school teachers in college and university once English instruction has become mandatory in the 5th and 6th grade level. They need some more language-focused programs in order to enhance the capacity to cover the newly mandated English instruction in their class. Preferably several programs are to be offered as optional programs such as foreign language pedagogy, methodology in the elementary school context and practical language training.

Foreign Language Activities, which is commonly referred to as English Activities in the Course of Study for the elementary schools (Chapter 4), outlines the contents to be dealt with, which consist of six items. One of the items is referred to as follows: "[To have pupils] become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language (MEXT, 2008)." Young pupils are very absorbent like a sponge and receptive to the exposure in language. Appropriate phonetic models displayed during interaction in class would contribute to "raising the learners' awareness of interesting aspects of language and its richness (ibid)." MEXT's intention is that sounds factors are to be dealt with by the ALT in the scope of the team-teaching delivery model. However, there are more than 30 "English Activities" classes in a school year and the team-teaching involving the ALT cannot be materialized throughout a year, much less in the schools located in rural areas where ALTs are not easily available for some reason or other. HRTs are to conduct the class solo for the most part even though audio resources in school are accessible. In this regard, the training programs for teacher trainees should include phonetic components, whatever names of the programs may be, so that prospective teachers wishing to work for the elementary schools can be better models of language teachers/learners in class.

Once English teaching has become mandatory at the elementary school level, it is crucial for teachers to equip themselves with the knowledge and fundamental oracy and literacy regarding the target language. Elementary school-teachers are generalist teachers who deliver most or all

subjects to their own class. However, when the teachers are viewed from the standpoint of pupils in class, students expect them to be knowledgeable and skillful in teaching English. In theory, in-service teachers are expected to be effective language teachers with a theoretical perspective of the language. When teachers come up with their expectations, the class can run effectively toward the goal of the class. In advance of the new elementary school curriculum guidelines which were officially implemented in 2011, MEXT issued instructions in 2009 to colleges and universities offering elementary school teachers' credential programs, encouraging them to make additions (adjustments) to elementary school teacher programs (Ohi, 2010) in order to meet the changing need in terms of teacher training. Prior to this notification from MEXT, in 2002 Chiba University, Faculty of Education made a modification to this program, adding "Inter-cultural communication" class to this program (Ohi, 2010). As with the case of Chiba University, Faculty of Education, most of the tertiary institutions that offer the elementary school teacher education programs, have created the courses that are instrumental in the English instruction in the elementary schools. However, the number of programs varies greatly from one institution to another.

### **Challenges facing chalk-face teachers**

At present, the government is transforming the educational policy because of the growing need. So the emphasis of English language education is placed on practical and communicative English as the political and economic strategies of the nation. As a part of the strategies, it was the new Course of Study for elementary schools that was promulgated in March, 2008. One of the salient points in the Course of Study is that English is stipulated as a part of curricular programs for the 5th and 6th grades respectively.

Before the full implementation of the new Course of Study in April 2011, there was a two-year transition period from 2009 to 2011, during which the majorities of elementary schools nationwide implemented the upcoming curriculum mandate on a trial basis. In pilot schools, the English class was conducted enthusiastically, and students participated in the conversation with ALTs in an excited manner and they familiarized themselves with daily vocabulary and the methods of greetings (Izumi, 2007), but it is not clear that the class was successfully undertaken nationwide.

There are several issues to be addressed with respect to teaching English in the elementary school. The majority of the elementary school teachers are not adequately prepared to teach English. In 2006, Benesse Corporation asked the curriculum coordinators in public elementary schools about their readiness to teach English. 3505 of the coordinators replied to the survey; 97.7 % of the coordinators answered that the time for development of the materials and class preparation of the teachers is not sufficient, and that English proficiency of the teachers is not adequate (Sakamoto, 2008). The data survey by Benesse Corporation in 2010 revealed that 62.1 % of the

HRTs (who took part) in the survey feel an additional English Activities class is an extra burden on them, and that 72.9 % of the HRTs (who responded to the survey) contend that the English Activities should be undertaken by specialist teachers. Other comments were: lack of sufficient time for preparation for the class and teaching materials-57.9%; shortage of their class arrangement time with ALTs for team-teaching-39%; and teachers' inadequate competency in English-33.6% (Yomiuri Shimbun newspaper on line, 2011). This indicates that elementary schools' curricula are tightly organized and teachers have plenty of responsibilities along with class teaching on a daily basis. Too large workload does not engender quality of education. If my speculation is not off the mark, the curriculum, teaching system and practice, and students' outcomes should be reexamined holistically in order for the teachers to exert their professional capacities. When teachers are placed in good working circumstances, educational efficacy will be realized.

When looking into the reference that English proficiency of the elementary school-teachers is inadequate, in the first place, they have not been taught teaching methods and pedagogy of English education in their teacher credential programs, since such courses were (are) not in the elementary school teacher program owing to the fact that teaching English was not included in the elementary school curriculum. In-service teachers have anticipated that English would become a core subject (not a Ryoiki matter) at the primary school level.

Acquiring proficiency of the foreign language and confidence in teaching the language with relevant skills can not be attained in a sporadic teacher training and professional development venue.

In Korea, the government requires that all elementary school teachers receive a minimum of 120 hours of in-service teacher training along with taking a series of courses on English conversation, English language pedagogy, educational psychology, and educational philosophy. In 2001 the Korean government announced that it wanted them to implement a weekly one-hour English-only class in Grades 3 to 6 within a year. But only around eight percent of some 10,000 teachers acquired a command of English sufficient to teach, using English only (Butler, 2004). The example of the Korean teacher training indicates that in-service teacher training takes time for the attainment of the goal of making in-service teachers successful language teachers, and that a veneer of in-service teacher training does not make sense. Continual and intensive efforts are to be made under the relevant programs. In terms of the professional development programs, some of the above programs the Korean government offered in the teacher development training are worthy of consideration for teacher training programs given that Korea and Japan are in the same EFL context.

There are various types of professional development. In my belief, the one-shot session is viewed as an ephemeral and sporadic measure, which can not come up with what current elementary



school teachers really need. According to Yomiuri Shinbun newspaper (2010, October 4), Tochigi Prefectural Board of Education offers annual in-service training for elementary school teachers focusing on the English instruction for four days during the summer. The participants discuss their classroom practice with other teachers and share ideas when demonstrating mock classes. As for the length of the in-service training along with the continuity, the four-day session (if one-day session consists of four blocks, each block lasting 80-90 minutes) will probably amount to the equivalent to one-term class time at college in terms of a teacher credential course, in which the session can cover relevant topics and issues in-service teachers have to cope with.

Additionally, the leadership role of head teachers and school administrators such as principals is critical when they organize in-school trainings in order to nurture the climate of professional development opportunities in the teaching venues. Izumi (2007) and her colleagues surveyed the perceptions of the elementary school teachers regarding what kinds of in-service teacher training they feel they need. Fifty-three percent of the respondents answered that they need training that is directly related to the class teaching. Seventeen percent of them responded that they would like methodological components. Fifteen percent of the teachers said that they need the strategies of teaching. Looking into the results of their survey, more than 50 % of the teachers wished for class-related training, which can be adaptable to the real class instruction. The teachers at the chalk-face seem desperate for the idea of tomorrow's class. This also indicates that teachers who are not armed with expertise of teaching English are in a dilemma struggling with a plethora of workloads as well as confusion of how to organize the next class.

### **Drive to expedite the relevant teacher education**

In the process of the revision of the curriculum guideline 2011, MEXT did not make a decision to rectify the topmost laws relating to teaching licensure such as the Teachers' License Act and Ordinance for Enforcement of the Teachers' License Act. The introduction of English necessitates elementary school-teachers to have access to additional professional development programs, which is a shared idea in the teaching community. When this fact is considered, MEXT might have an assumption that "Communication in a foreign language (Article 66[-6] in the Ordinance)," in the current framework of elementary teacher training programs could be responsive to the newly adopted English instruction in the new curriculum guidelines. English instruction adopted at the elementary level, although it is part of the Ryoiki area studies, should entail some legitimate measures. Furthermore, the Teachers' License Act is not constituted on the premise that the English language as a foreign language be taught at the grade school level.

There remains inconsistency in this regard. Furthermore, with the vision that the class of English Activities in the Ryoiki area is in the future to be allotted to the core subject area as English

in the elementary school curriculum, the Central Government should rectify the inconsistency as soon as possible once English instruction has become a mandatory curriculum program at the elementary school level. The revision of the Teachers' License Act will expedite the establishment of the crucial courses of teaching English in the grade school level with respect to the higher educational institutions, at which teacher education is, in principle, to be exercised in Japan.

Following the establishment of relevant teacher education programs for the people wishing to be elementary school-teachers, some challenges in the context of elementary schools are to be addressed for the attainment of what MEXT intends to materialize. In my belief, pre-service teachers who have received adequate course work and language training at the educational institutions can conquer some challenges: paucity of the ideas of how to organize tomorrow's class including preparation of teaching materials; difficulty or uncomfortableness regarding the communication with assistant (partner) teachers; less proficiency in the target language in class; overall feeling of unpreparedness in teaching the language. In effect, they can engage in teaching the foreign language class with a positive attitude, which will lead to the students' active participation in the class. From viewing the perspectives of boards of education and administrators, they can dispense with the taxing hiring practice of ALTs, much less considerable expenditure to be secured for those assistant personnel.

The budget money spent on the ALTs who work as sojourners in Japan should be better spent in a way that practicing teachers and teacher trainees at college have opportunities to be better trained in order for those people to become full-fledged teachers. Thus, the effects of the better spent expenditure will perpetuate as long as the recipients of the professional development and pre-service teacher training remain at home. It is high time that the Japanese government shift away from the policy that relies on native English speaking people to the policy that Japanese teachers can undertake the class by themselves. Financing the professional development of chalk-face teachers should not be put on the back burner.

### **In closing**

When the demographic composition of teachers in the grade schools is viewed, 38.4 % of primary school teachers are in their fifties and the average age of all the elementary school teachers nationwide is 44.4 (MEXT, 2011).

The distorted demographics have negative implications in the elementary schools given that having a wide age-range of people in schools generates a vibrant environment in education. In addition, newly prescribed English instruction in elementary schools must be a big challenge to elementary school teachers, especially to the teachers in the older generations. A long time must

have passed since those in the generations ceased to be exposed to the environment of learning/teaching English.

To put it in a positive light, when the new framework of education is in place and pre-service programs and in-service professional development programs are overhauled, new recruits and practicing teachers who have received adequate pedagogy and training will become the ones who can invigorate the new curriculum program, complying with the expectations from the stakeholders and maximize the foreign language instruction in the elementary schools.

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