

Favorable Progress of English Education in Japan

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[Favorable Progress of English Education in Japan]

## INTRODUCTION

Last year, Japan made a dramatic and blessed change in language education. The Japanese government (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) decided to start English education for last 2 years of elementary school on March 28th, 2008. English education became mandatory as a foreign language activity for 35 credit hours per year. It is welcome change. Elementary students should study English. But it raises some controversy that it is really required or appropriate, and how it benefits students.

Currently in Japan, students have the chance to be educated in English in junior high school (3 years), high school (3 years) and college (4 years). But most adults can't communicate in English well. They can't understand even daily conversation. It's not too serious a problem because they don't have to use English in daily life. However, it's "mortal trouble" for the

industrial world. Since the Japanese economy strongly relies on trade, mutual dialogue is quite significant for businessman. Proficient language skill is prerequisite. In addition, the current extension of globalism and borderless society fosters the necessity of language skill.

### Body

Many Japanese adults, especially international workers, think that they need to study more or improve their method of studying English. They know that unless they have been educated for several years, they have not learned foreign language enough. Once more, they reconsider why they can't communicate and what they should do. They are not satisfied with the present situation and they feel the need to change.

Most Japanese have trouble in speaking, listening and pronouncing of English. On the other hand, many people are capable of reading and writing, and they understand grammar well.

Doubtless, the Japanese weak point about English is oral communication. It is difficult to overcome this weak point for each person. And many companies can't afford to train their employees in English because of a long depression. So, most Japanese expect the innovation of English education at school for their children and grandchildren.

Recently, educators in elementary school have recognized the importance of English education, so many elementary schools have implemented it voluntarily. Research by the government says that in 2008, 97.1% of public elementary schools provide several types of English activities<sup>1</sup>. For example, students practice greetings, singing songs and playing games. The average credit hour is 14.7% per year of their final grades. The matters of education are very dependent on the school policy. The teachers at elementary school realized the necessity of foreign language education and tried to provide a chance for

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<sup>1</sup>Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology "Survey about current situation of English education in elementary school" URL:<[http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/gaikokugo/kanren/index.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/gaikokugo/kanren/index.htm)>Accessed 15 December

their students.

These efforts of teachers in elementary schools should be admired and the timing of this education also should be hailed, because it is obvious that beginning to study English in elementary school has some merits. This innovation will achieve dramatic development of communication ability and result in tremendous progress of English education in Japan. Also, it will give many Japanese children opportunities about improving their ability to communicate in English.

First, students will have much more time to spent on studying English. They will master a greater variety of vocabulary and diverse expression. Based on the guidance of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, they will have 35 credit hours per year. Including preparation and review, they will be exposed to

English for a long time. Moreover, they will start to think in English and about culture by themselves. It should be a marvelous trigger for young children.

Second, elementary school days are the right time to acquire proper pronunciation and better listening capability. Some researchers say that below 12 or 13 years old is a favorable time to master natural pronunciation. They call this time "critical period"<sup>2</sup>. If they start to study English early, they will be able to acquire clear pronunciation and proper intonation. This time change will provide the opportunity to make up for the Japanese weakness in pronunciation. Most Japanese are struggling with pronunciation and listening; these are difficult problems to overcome after they become

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<sup>2</sup>English education in Saitama URL<<http://www.asahi-net.or.jp/~ge9m-mtmt/left.htm>> Accessed 12 December

Third, young students are fascinated by early education of English. Elementary students will begin to pay attention to foreign language and culture. For them, it is important not only to master another language but also to understand another culture and custom. Understanding other cultures contributes to developing their immature minds and brings up the pride as a member of their own country, Japan. Through language education, children can be educated about the dignity of Japanese people. It may be the most important point of study in school.

#### Counter Argument

However, some people insist that English education in elementary school is improper. First, they believe that students in elementary school are too immature to study foreign language. Japanese and English have quite different grammar, especially in the order of words. So that may cause confusion for children. Elementary students don't understand Japanese grammar perfectly; therefore, studying foreign

language will hinder their mastery of learning their mother language.

Second, there are other subjects that students must study besides English. One of the recent problems concerning education is that young men have shown poor ability in studying and learning. Compared to "old times", their competence has decreased dramatically. Some insist that students must study other subjects like arithmetic, history and so on before studying English.

There is one indication of their reduced capability. It is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) that is conducted by Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Comparing the results in 2003 and 2006 to 1st grade at high school, the ability of reading and understanding fell from 14th to 15th, Mathematical literacy fell from 6th to 10<sup>th</sup> place, and Science literacy fell from 2nd to 6<sup>th</sup> place<sup>3</sup>. Many educators are anxious about the outcome and

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<sup>3</sup>PISA2006 URL<[http://www.mext.go.jp/a\\_menu/shotou/gakuryoku-chousa/sonota/07032813.htm](http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/gakuryoku-chousa/sonota/07032813.htm)> Accessed 11 December

they strongly claim that we should give children more rigorous education starting in elementary school.

Critics should agree to this time government decision to include English in elementary school. First, many Japanese will be able to master smooth conversation. In Japan, challenges in English communication are speaking and listening, not reading and writing. In current Japanese, students get some ability to read and write, but can't do speaking or listening smoothly. It is obvious that below 12 or 13 years old is the critical period to master natural sounds. If they miss these good opportunities, it will be more difficult later. On the other hand, writing and reading can be learned after junior high school.

Second, studying a foreign language does not hinder the mastery of one's mother language. Critics say that at first

it may bring confusion; on the contrary, it facilitates the understanding of the grammar of second language. By comparing two languages, children can know features of both words. In addition, students will comprehend more deeply their mother language.

Some countries already introduce English education in elementary school, for example, Korea, Thailand and Taiwan. They also study their mother tongue as well as English, but there is no indication that early English education disturbs the mastery of mother the tongue.

Considering the critics' concern about student' reduced ability in studying and learning, it is not quiet exact. Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2007(TIMSS2007) conducted by The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IAE) indicates that Japanese

students in elementary school (4th grade) and junior high school (2nd grade) keep a high rank(3rd to 5th) in arithmetic and science among more than 36 countries<sup>4</sup>.

The third reason to include the study of English in elementary school is the focus of lessons. Lessons in junior high and high school tend to concentrate on the writing and reading, because a lot of schools try to prepare students for the examination to enter college. However, elementary school usually doesn't have to take in to consideration that kind of exam. The focus of elementary students' English lessons should be easy, those teach only the existence of differences and very basic grammar. Indeed, singing and playing games may be enough.

What kind of lesson is favorable for elementary school students? It's enough for them to be exposed to English. It's important to get them interested in studying foreign language

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<sup>4</sup>National Institute for education policy research, timss2007 URL<<http://www.nier.go.jp/timss/2007/index.html>> Accessed 11 December

and knowing about new culture. They may be too young to understand another custom, but they can feel something and easily accept new knowledge without resistance.

In addition, the emphasis of English education in elementary school should not be on grammar. Many educators are likely to teach grammar and vocabulary. That is definitely wrong. We should take advantage of their young age as a specific, suitable time for speaking and listening. To master correct grammar is important, but only secondarily. If they misunderstand some grammar, they can modify it later.

Ideally, teachers who can pronounce native sounds should teach English in schools. Some schools can employ natives to support the teachers. But that is not for all schools. Because of budget or circumstance, some schools can't secure native speakers. In such cases, CD and DVD are utilizable. Teachers

who can speak with native accent are not mandatory. The importance is to give students a chance to be exposed to natural sounds.

### Conclusion

The recent change concerning English education in elementary school is a good change. Many Japanese people will speak English better and communicate well in the near future because of it.

It is important to take in to consideration student' ability and what is required for them now. It is time to reconsider our foreign language education system and how to communicate Japanese identity as one of developed and peaceful countries.

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