

# A Survey of Junior High School Teachers' Attitudes towards Primary English Education

中学校英語教師を対象とした小学校英語に対する意識調査

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## Introduction

Japan has been somewhat slower than some of its neighbours in introducing English at primary level. For example the Chinese Education Ministry mandates English study from third grade, and requires primary school students to have at least four periods of English per week (Cheng 2002). South Korea introduced compulsory English education in primary school in 1997, mandating 2 hours per week, also from third grade. (Kachru & Nelson 2006: 177). In Taiwan, primary school English was introduced compulsorily in 2005, also from third grade, according to the Taiwanese Ministry of Education. Similarly, a publication by the British Council (2004), reported that English was a required subject in Elementary School in Hong Kong, India and Malaysia. In the light of this, therefore, it is, to many people, a question of not if, but when, Japan will follow suit.

Junior High School English teachers are among those most affected by the decision, if and when it comes, to either make English a compulsory subject at Primary level, continue with its current status as an optional element in the “sogotekina gakushu no jikan”, or even to return to the pre-2002 position of having no English taught in state-run schools until the beginning of Junior High. Under the old system, Junior High School English teachers could assume that first-year students were starting with no formal English instruction, and could plan their classes accordingly. Since then, the waters have become muddied somewhat, in that Primary School principles are now in a position to decide how much (if any) English instruction is to be given as well as by whom it will be taught.

This study aims to examine Junior High School Teachers' attitudes to Primary English education. In particular it seeks to learn their reactions to the following questions:

- Should English be taught in Primary School, and if so, should it be compulsory, and when should it begin?
- Which areas should be the focus for Primary English instruction, and who should

be responsible for teaching them?

- What are the potential advantages and disadvantages of compulsory English education at Primary level?

### **Methodology and Background Information**

Questionnaires were distributed to 67 Junior School English Teachers currently working at state-run schools in Nagasaki Prefecture. All of the teachers were attending a two-week training course in communicative teaching in August 2007. The sample was essentially random, in as far as attendance is obligatory for all teachers for one out of five academic years. Thus, this sample represented approximately 20% of the population (Nagasaki Prefecture public Junior High School English teachers).

The questionnaires were kept as brief as possible; as in previous surveys (Brown 2006a, Brown 2007), on a single side of A4, in order to allow teachers to complete them during their break. This provided a 100% return rate, but limited the amount of data that could be gathered.

Problems with time (this was a once-a-year opportunity to have such a large group of teachers together in one room) meant that a pilot version of the questionnaire could not be trialed. Nevertheless, this method of responding (ticking boxes) proved far more effective than the previous method of having teachers rank various choices (Brown 2006a, Brown 2007). Adding instructions in Japanese was considered, but this would have meant making the questionnaire more than one page. Items were chosen on the basis of informal conversations with teachers over the past year.

Of the respondents 48 were female, 19 were male. Average length of experience was just over 11 years.

### **Should English be taught in Primary school?**

Teachers were asked, "Do you think English should be taught in Primary School?" Options were "Yes, as a compulsory subject", "Yes, but as an optional subject" (the current situation), or "No, not at all" (See Fig. 1).

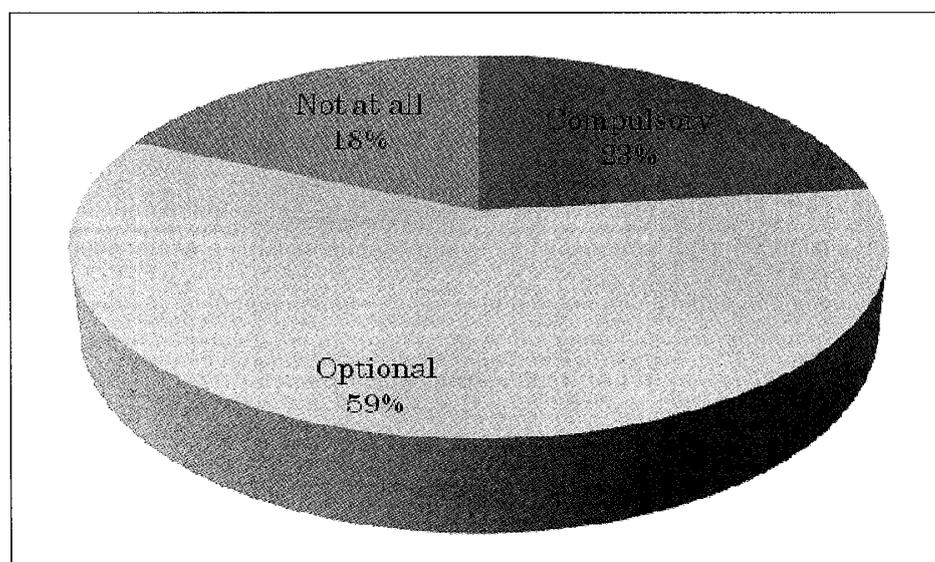
Teachers were overwhelmingly in favour of maintaining the current status quo, with almost 60% expressing the opinion that English should remain an optional subject in Primary School.

23% of Junior High School teachers came out in support of the implementation of compulsory English in Primary School. This compares with a figure of 36.6% of 2,234 Primary School teachers quoted in a survey carried out by the Ministry of Education

in 2004 (MEXT 2005).

When asked for a reason for their choice, several teachers gave reasons such as “They must study Japanese first”, “Primary school children should learn Japanese (kanji) above English”, and “They should value mother tongue more”. There does seem to be a fear that the introduction of Primary level English will exacerbate what is seen as a decline in standards of Japanese among young people, especially in knowledge of kanji and polite forms. Nevertheless, there is no evidence from other countries to show that studying a second language at an early age disrupts the acquisition of the mother tongue. It is true, however, that if compulsory English is introduced, time will need to be found for it in an already crowded school schedule. If time devoted to other subjects (especially those seen as declining, such as Japanese and Mathematics) has to be reduced in order to accommodate English, this is likely to be controversial.

**Fig. 1 Should English be Taught in Primary School?**



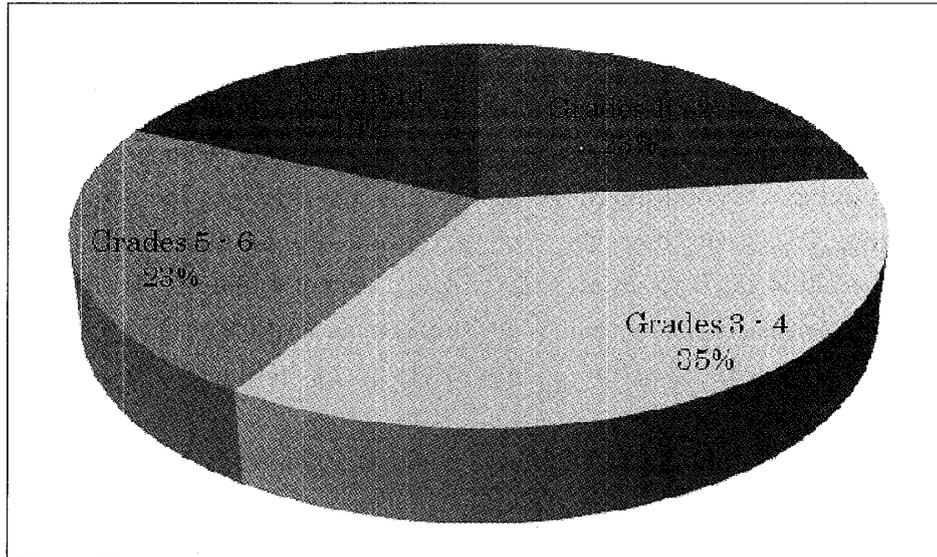
### **When should we start English education in Primary School?**

Many writers (e.g. Slattery & Willis 2001, Cameron 2001) have emphasized the strengths of children as foreign language learners (for a summary, see Brown 2006b). While it could be argued that the earlier we start the more likely we are to be able to approximate English acquisition to that of the L1, there still appears to be opposition to starting from the first grade. Indeed, we have seen that third grade is the most common starting point in other Asian countries.

Teachers were asked at which grade they felt English Education should begin in Primary School (see Figure 2). Opinions were fairly evenly spread, with Grades 3-4 receiving the strongest support. This would bring Japan into line with many of its

Asian neighbours. However, it is worth noting that 20% of teachers chose first grade as the optimal start time. This came second to Grade 4, which accounted for 23%.

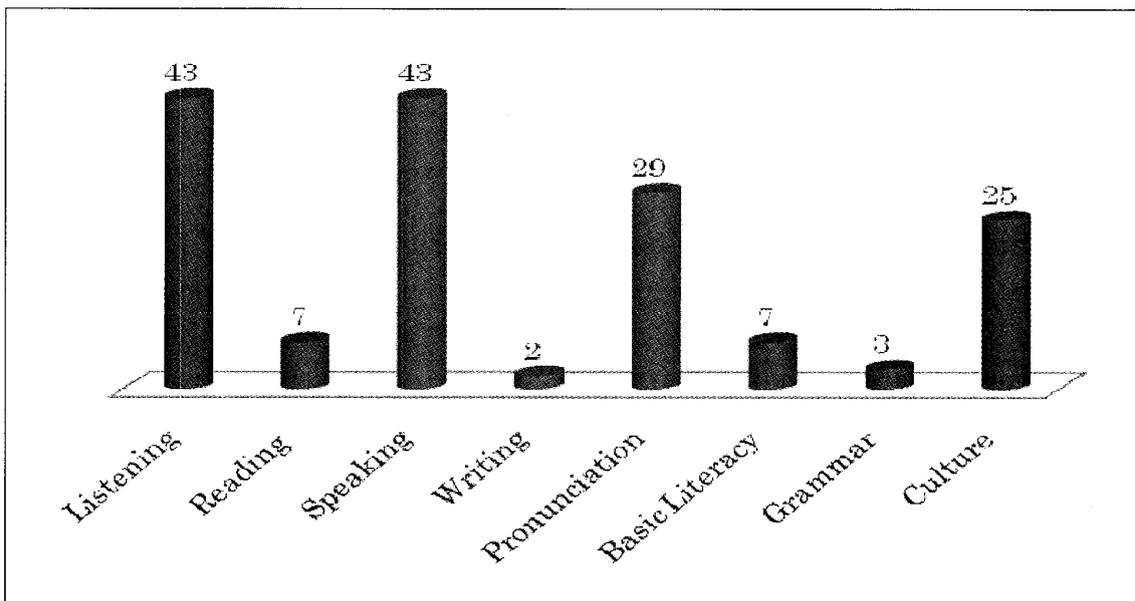
**Fig. 2 When should Primary English education begin ?**



### Areas of Focus

Teachers were asked the question, "If English is taught in Primary school, what areas should be focused on?", and were invited to choose up to three areas from a list (see Fig. 3)

**Fig. 3 What areas should be focused on ?**



Not surprisingly, speaking and listening were by far the most popular choices, with the most commonly selected combinations of responses being Speaking/Listening/Pronunciation or Speaking/Listening/Culture. Tajino and Walker (1998: 121-122) found that teaching pronunciation was regarded by ALTs and JTEs as being first in terms of “what students expect ALTs to do”, and ranked second by the students themselves. Nevertheless a previous survey of Junior High School Teachers (Brown 2006) found that “improving students’ pronunciation” was ranked last in a list of benefits resulting from the presence of the ALT at their level.

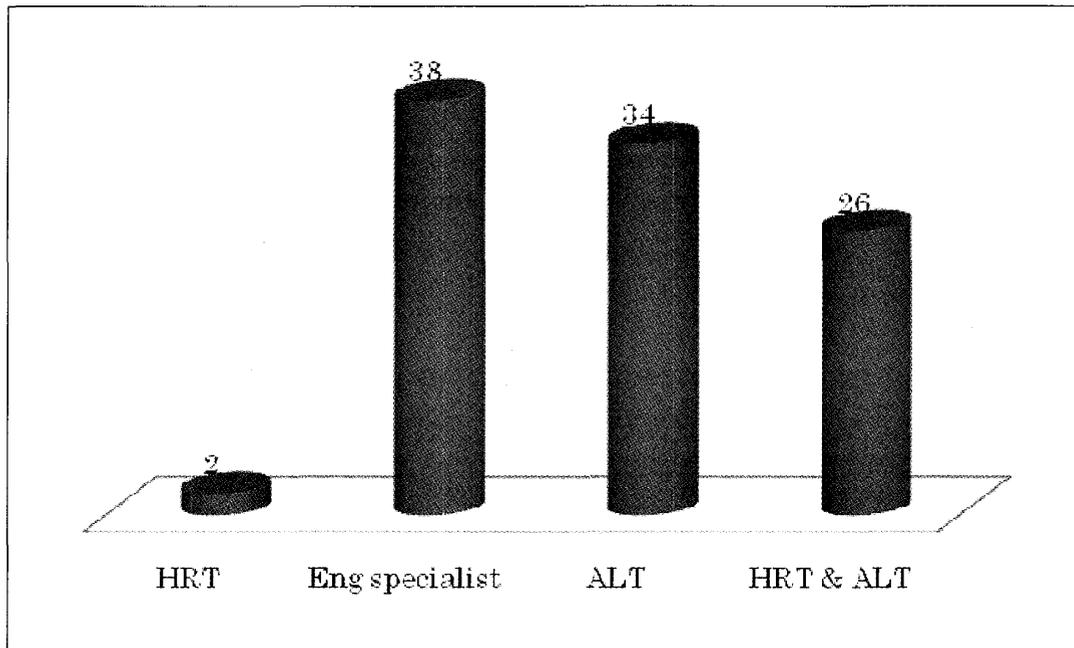
### **Responsibility for Teaching English in Primary School**

Teachers were asked “If English is taught in Primary school, who should teach it?” (see Fig. 4). The most common choice here was an English specialist, either visiting from, for example, Junior High school, or working in Primary school, but teaching only English. This was followed by ALT, and then a team-teaching situation.

The most worrying finding here is the lack of confidence expressed by Junior High School teachers about Primary School Home Room teachers’ ability to conduct English classes. Despite the fact that multiple selections were permitted, only two respondents selected the option “Home Room Teacher”.

Medgyes (1992) pointed out several advantages of English being taught by teachers who share a mother tongue with their students, including a greater ability to teach learning strategies, to anticipate problems, and to empathise with their students’ needs. Moreover, the simple fact of having fluency in the L1 is an advantage not to be undervalued. One aspect of this is what Slattery and Willis (2001: 122-3) refer to as “recasting”, that is hearing what learners are trying to communicate in the L1, and helping them to say it in English. Nevertheless, Medgyes (1992:349) concludes that the non-native teacher of English should have achieved “near-native proficiency”. It is presumably a lack of proficiency on the part of home room teachers which precludes them from being given responsibility for taking English classes in the eyes of their Junior High School counterparts. Even more surprisingly, a greater number of respondents felt it better to put English classes in the hands of ALTs working alone than have them team-teach with the home room teacher. Tajino and Tajino (2000) point to the potential for synergy of having both a non-native and native-speaking teacher in the classroom. While it is likely that most primary school English teachers have no teaching qualifications in English, it is also the case that most ALTs have no teaching qualifications at all. For this reason there still appears to me to be a large scope for such synergy in the primary English classroom.

Fig. 4 Who should teach it?



### Benefits of Primary School English

Teachers were asked “What do you see as the biggest potential advantage of Primary school English?” (see Fig. 5). Options were :

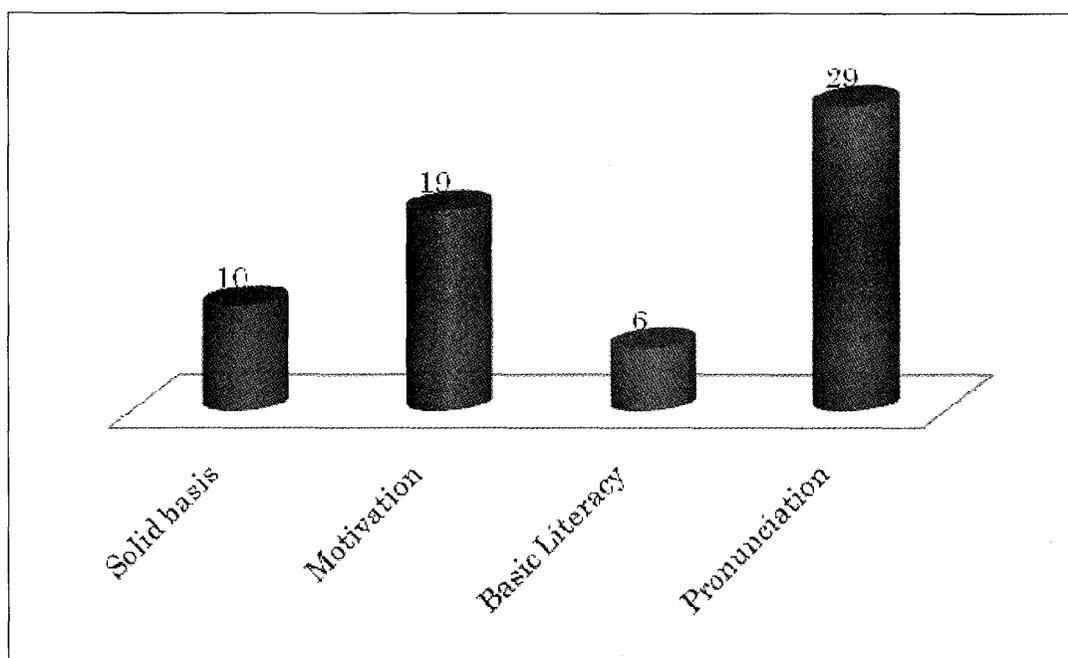
- Students will start Junior High School with a solid knowledge of basic English
- Students will be more highly motivated about English
- Junior High School teachers will not have to spend time on basic literacy
- Students will have good pronunciation, having learnt at an early age
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Improvement in students’ pronunciation was seen as the biggest advantage. Indeed there seems to be a general consensus that the earlier English education begins, the better pronunciation will become, with some parents even going as far as to have their children take part in English activities, even before they have started to speak Japanese.

The importance of pronunciation should not be overlooked, even if we feel, as more and more educators do, that native-like proficiency does not need to be the goal, especially at phoneme level. Indeed, Jenkins (2000, 2003), in describing the “common core” of pronunciation in English as an International Language, emphasizes the importance of stress and intonation for mutual comprehensibility. Furthermore she gives several examples of loss of understanding between Japanese speakers and other Asians, resulting from errors in such areas, especially in the misplacement of the nuclear stress (Jenkins, 2000: 43). As has already been mentioned, the presence

of ALTs has done little to improve pronunciation at Junior High school level, at least according to teachers (Brown 2006). If real progress is to be made, then phonological targets need to be set, and materials developed for Primary teachers to help develop students in key areas, both receptively and productively.

**Fig. 5 Biggest potential advantage**



### **Drawbacks of Primary School English**

Teachers were asked “What do you see as the biggest potential disadvantage of Primary school English?” (see Fig. 6). Options were:

Students may get the idea that learning English means only songs and games

Students may have already had enough of English by the end of Primary school

Students will start Junior High with differing levels of English knowledge

Students will have the impression it is not necessary to study grammar

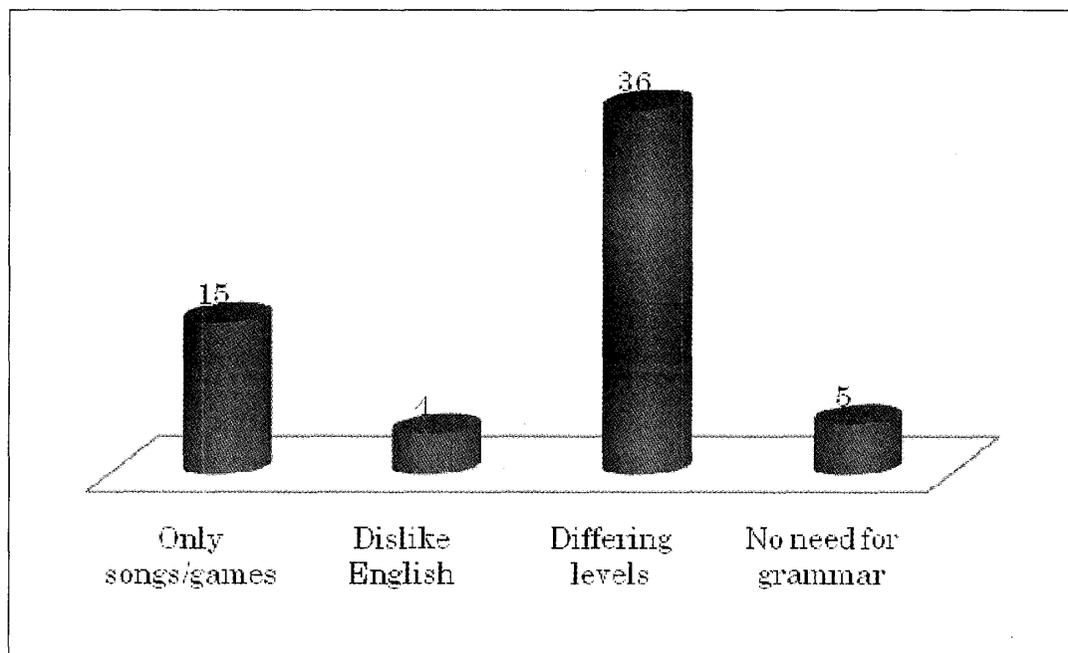
Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

Almost 20% of respondents feared that students would enter Junior High School expecting English classes to consist mainly of songs and games, as may have been the case in Primary school. However, the likely wide discrepancy in starting levels of students entering Junior High school was seen as the major drawback in introducing English classes, accounting for 54% of responses. The irony here is that the majority of teachers feel that the current system of optional English should be continued. It seems incontrovertible that an optional system creates a much greater likelihood of such discrepancy than would a compulsory system.

Butler and Iino (2005: 41) refer to the problem of the huge variability, both in quality and quantity, of primary English education under the current optional system. Some students graduate from primary school having followed a structured syllabus by a combination of enthusiastic home room teachers, ALTs and English specialists. Others may have had one hour per month of games and songs, or even nothing at all.

Indeed, this problem has not escaped the scrutiny of the Ministry of Education. A Ministry spokesman, quoted in the Guardian Weekly (2006), decried the fact that “English education varies depending on the school...By making the language a compulsory subject, we are hoping to level the playing field.” It is for this reason that one of hour of compulsory English education looks likely to be introduced at fifth and sixth grades in the near future.

**Fig. 6 Biggest potential disadvantage**



### Concluding Remarks

This initial study shows that Junior High School teachers in Nagasaki have somewhat mixed feelings about the introduction of English into the Primary School curriculum. Most (just over 80%) believe that some form of English education is a good idea, but should not be introduced until at least third grade. Moreover, almost 60% believe that English should remain optional, despite the obvious problems of lack of standardisation that this brings about (a problem that many see as being a serious one). They feel that English should be taught by either an English specialist or by an ALT (even working alone), and generally show a lack of confidence in Home Room Teachers to successfully carry out English instruction. They hope that the students

who will come into their care at the start of Junior High School will have a grounding in listening, speaking and pronunciation, but would rather that reading, writing and knowledge of grammar be left up to themselves.

Clearly there is work to be done if English is to be successfully incorporated into the Primary School curriculum. There is a need to go beyond the current guidelines, and set clear targets for teachers and students to work towards. Materials need to be standardised in order to achieve those targets and must go beyond merely games and songs, but include listening, pronunciation and communication activities. Furthermore teachers need to be identified, and others must be trained in order to successfully implement these changes, rather than leaving English classes in the hands of the ALT. In this way, Junior High School teachers will see Primary English as a positive contribution to their own work, rather than as a potential problem.

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