

Developing Japanese Elementary Students' English Communication Abilities : Manifesto and Reality

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1. Introduction

The teaching of English to young learners is one of the most prominent branches of EFL today. With the hopes of a better future for their children with knowledge of English for international communication, many governments, schools, and parents worldwide are searching for an ideal way to teach English to their children. Many school programs focus on developing childrens' communicative abilities and in this pursuit, children are starting to study English at younger and younger ages.

Compulsory English education at the elementary school level in Japan was officially instituted in April of 2011 by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). MEXT prescribes three specific objectives for the new elementary English curriculum (MEXT, 2009b : 2) :

1. Deepen experiential understanding of foreign language and culture through foreign language.
2. Become familiar with the language in a proactive manner.
3. Cultivate communicative abilities.

Of these three objectives, the crux of this paper is specifically interested in the Ministry's stated goal of cultivating young learners' communicative abilities. As the learners in Japanese elementary schools are 5th and 6th grade students, this study is particularly interested in learning and teaching in relation to children aged roughly around ten to twelve years of age.

After an examination of current EFL policy and practice in Japan, the author will analyze survey responses from Japanese elementary English teachers regarding their own personal understanding and classroom application of MEXT's stated elementary English goals. In such, this paper will expose and consider the gap between the official stated goals of the elementary EFL curriculum and the failure to realize the development of communicative ability in the classroom. In conclusion, the goal of further teacher training is suggested to help enable Japanese elementary English teachers to better develop their students' communicative abilities.

2. Japan's Initiation into Elementary School English Education

Japanese public schools have only just recently joined the ranks of other nations that have made English language education compulsory at the elementary school level. Internal and external pressures led Japan to officially incorporate English language studies at the public elementary school level starting in 2002. From 2002 until 2010, public elementary schools were given the option to incorporate English language into their students' studies under the wide-spreading theme of *Sogo-teki na Gakushu no Jikan*, or Period for Integrated Studies. As the course content for this Period of Integrated Studies was left up to individual schools, the actual introduction of English classes, and the regularity of which they were taught, varied greatly from school to school.

The existing Course of Study guidelines were revised and established in 2008, and with a step towards standardizing English education among public elementary schools in Japan, they called for compulsory English education nationwide, specified for the 5th and 6th grade classrooms (Taihara, 2012 : 4). MEXT stated that the main goal of elementary English would be to promote students' positive attitudes towards communication through the experience of communicating in the foreign language, with an emphasis that lessons and activities be enjoyable for students. Additionally, there was to be no explicit teaching of reading or writing skills (Matsukawa and Oshiro : 2008 : 31-32), nor any type of testing allocated in this new system (MEXT, 2008). English lessons were set to be held once a week, for a total of 35 class hours annually. Existing elementary school teachers would be assigned the additional English language teaching responsibilities, and native-speaking Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) visits would also be incorporated as available per region and school.

In bringing about this plan, the years from 2008 until 2011 were specified as a transition period for schools, teachers, and students to acclimate themselves to the new structure, responsibilities, and consummation of the type of classroom prescribed by MEXT. April 2011 marked the official start of the institution of this initiative nationwide.

In response to the call for English teaching resources nationwide, MEXT developed and distributed to all schools a curriculum, textbook, and inclusive teachers guide called *Eigo Noto*, English Notebook (MEXT, 2009a, 2009b). Only one year later in April 2012, MEXT introduced a slightly revised curriculum, textbook, and teachers guide called *Hi, Friends* (MEXT, 2012b). Although MEXT has provided these materials, the official line is that the materials are meant only as guidelines and that schools have freedom in their interpretation and execution of English lessons. Matsukawa and Oshiro point out that 'the successful implementation of new English activities depends on adapting them to meet students' actual abilities and regional situations (2008, cited in Hall et al., 2012 : 206).

One major challenge of this newly proposed curriculum is that the existing 5th and 6th grade teachers would be responsible for deciding how to adopt the curriculum and materials into their own classroom, as well as for teaching the lessons themselves. This boils down to local elementary school teachers being ultimately responsible for attending to the development of their students' communicative abilities in English. The following section will consider how Japanese elementary teachers are responding to this challenge by examining teachers' questionnaire responses.

3. Analysis of Questionnaire Responses

In order to get a more comprehensive idea of Japanese elementary school English teachers' experiences and opinions regarding teaching methodology, learner motivations, teacher development, and the development of communicative abilities, a questionnaire was prepared in Japanese. Questions were based on a six-point Likert scale, intentionally omitting a pure neutral choice and forcing respondents to choose some degree of agreement or disagreement. Although labels were provided for each answer choice, scores were assigned a numerical value from one to six.

As to avoid any misinterpretation of the key terms 'communicative ability' and 'meaningful interactions' that were used in the questionnaire, Japanese-language translations of the following definitions were provided :

Communicative ability : The ability to effectively (but not necessarily accurately) communicate using language and grammar appropriate to the situation, while making use of communication strategies (non-verbal communication, paraphrasing, asking for help, etc.) to help maintain the conveyance of meaning.

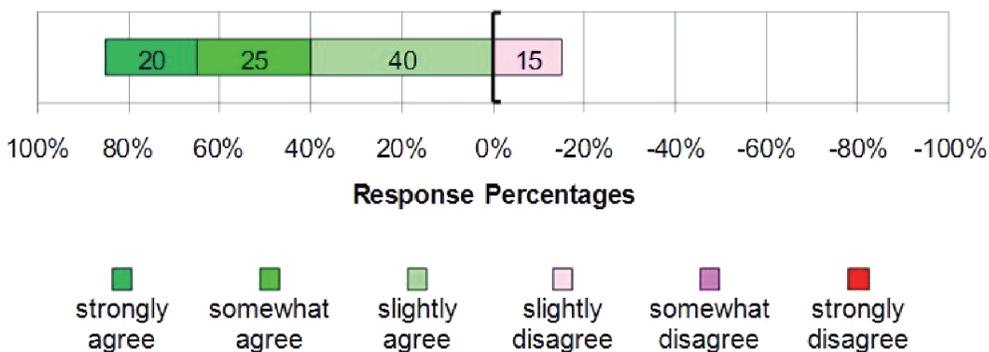
Meaningful interaction : A comprehensible interaction that involves the transfer or co-construction of knowledge that is new to one or more of the interlocutors. The focus in such an interaction is on the function of talk rather than the accuracy of grammatical forms.

Twenty completed questionnaires were returned, all of the responders being elementary school English teachers in Aomori Prefecture in northern Japan. Although this sample size is too small to claim accurate representation of all Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), the questionnaire results do reveal some interesting responses and paradoxes that would be mirrored nationwide to some degree.

I started off the questionnaire by asking teachers what they felt about the goals of elementary English. MEXT clearly states on the very first page of the English Notebook Guidance Materials for teachers (2009b) that developing communicative ability is one of the major goals of elementary school English education. However, teachers did not seem to be in complete agreement with this objective. While 85% of respondents were in general agreement that it is a major goal, 40% slightly agreed, while 15% slightly disagreed, placing the majority of responders near an axis of neutrality as shown in Chart 3.1 below.

Chart 3.1

Q1: Do you feel that the ability to communicate in English is currently a major goal of elementary school English education?

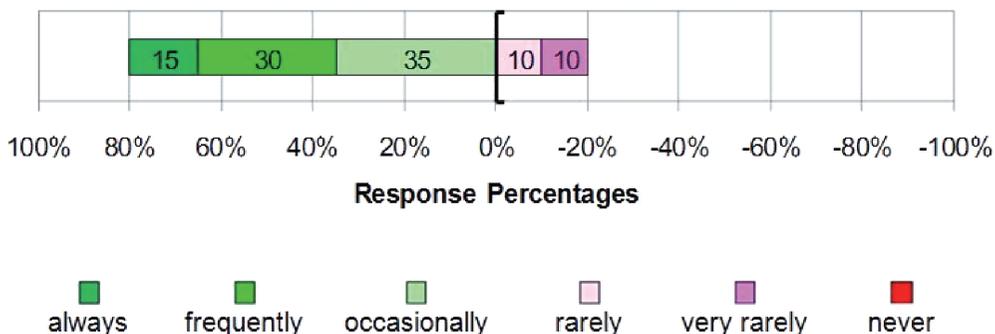


It is this 65% of respondents being so close to having a neutral opinion on the issue that is concerning. This statistic shows a disparity between MEXT’s explicitly stated elementary language goals and how educators are interpreting these goals in their own classrooms. The difference may also be the result of these teachers own personal experiences with English lessons and their perception of what would be a more realistic educational goal for their students. Whatever the reason, if JTEs hold differing views of the goals of elementary school English lessons, particularly if not focused on developing communicative ability, then students’ own experiences, attitudes, and communicative abilities will also vary from school to school. Indeed, one teacher commented in the free response section of the questionnaire, “I feel there is too much focus on communication. I feel that it is important for students to remember by sight and understand the meanings through writing.”

Chart 3.2 below shows how often JTE respondents use Japanese to explain or clarify the English used in the classroom.

Chart 3.2

Q20: How often do you use Japanese to explain or clarify the meaning of the English presented and used in the classroom?



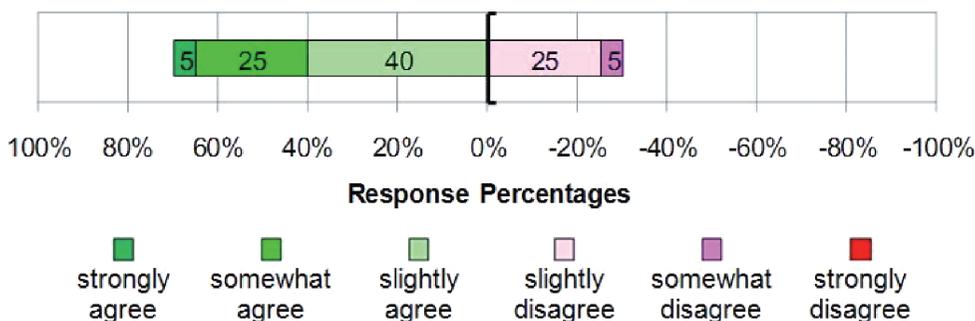
Responses show that 15% of teachers always use Japanese to explain or clarify the meaning of English. Based on frequency, a total of 80% of respondents seem to favor using Japanese in explanations, while only 20% use it much less frequently. Of the respondents, it seems that no one adheres to a no-Japanese policy in the English classroom.

Van Lier does identify that L1 can sometimes be used in effective ways in the EFL classroom (1996 : 18-19), and there may be certain advantages when considering issues of students' L2 language level, discipline, and motivation (Cameron, 2001 : 202). However, there is concern when L1 is used to translate any L2 that students have already demonstrated understanding and correct use of.

In trying to identify possible reasons for why teachers would consciously decide to so heavily rely on Japanese in the classroom, a number of survey questions may provide insight. One major concern that many teachers seem to feel is that their students need to clearly understand all of the English presented in use in the classroom (Chart 3.3).

Chart 3.3

Q19: How important do you feel it is for students to clearly understand all of the English language presented and used in the classroom?



Paul states that a common misperception among teachers is that a clear explanation of new (L2) language will enable young learners to understand more clearly (2003 : 16). Although older learners may more efficiently learn through direct learning and explicit explanations, young learners are more apt to learn better when given opportunities to ‘notice’ and socially negotiate the meaning of L2. In this way, Paul argues that ‘instead of being clear, (teachers) should create deliberate confusion’ in order to ‘stimulate the children to mentally reach out towards the new words and patterns’ (2003 : 16-17).

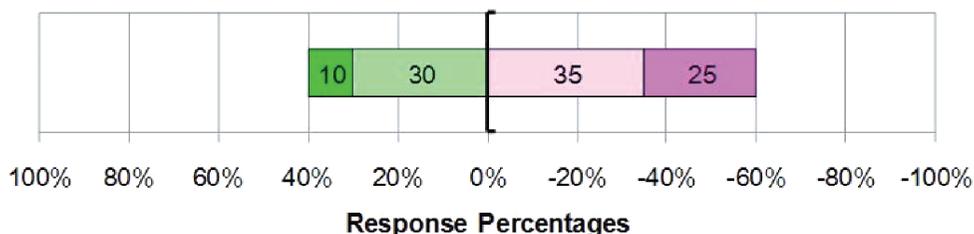
Furthermore, as for teachers that tend to translate almost every English utterance during the class period into Japanese, it can be argued that such actions are actually detrimental toward students developing communicative ability. In fact, the second of Cameron’s guiding principles in learning spoken English is that children must participate in contextual use of the language in order to develop their own discourse skills (2001 : 36), skills which are an essential component of communicative abilities.

An alternative to translating the English used in class is the use of paraphrasing. Paraphrasing works towards multiple language goals and can be used to help ensure students understand any new language used. At the same time, paraphrasing affects their communicative strategies by exposing students to a variety of language forms that express similar functions. Wells (1999 : 51) points out that responsibility falls on the adult to compensate for the child’s limitations through the use of modified speech utterances and the use of paraphrasing. However, according to Chart 3.4 below, there seems great division amongst teachers on the use of this method in the classroom. Over half of teachers identify that they rarely or very rarely use paraphrasing in their teaching.

Chart 3.4

Q7: How often do you employ the following classroom methods and activities in your own English teaching?

Item T: using different language constructs to say the same things to students (paraphrasing)



■ always
 ■ frequently
 ■ occasionally
 ■ rarely
 ■ very rarely
 ■ never

As was previously identified, young learners do not learn effectively through direct teaching. So, teachers should not expect that providing exact translations for all of the language used will actually result in students' learning and understanding of the language. As young learners learn better through noticing, it is the teacher's responsibility to provide for such opportunities. Paraphrasing can be utilized as a type of *educational scaffolding* (Woods, Bruner, and Ross, 1976) in such cases. Bruner defines scaffolding as 'a process of setting up a situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it' (1983 : 60). In taking away their students' learning opportunities through too much 'hand holding', we can never expect students to develop communicative competence.

One key term that was defined for teachers in this questionnaire was that of *meaningful interactions*. Young learners have been identified as learning more effectively when they are using the L2 to communicate *new* information that is of interest and relevance to the child. For children, they 'attempt to communicate and in their attempts, learn language' (Scovel, 2001 : 21). Hence, having students ask each other "what's your name?" in a classroom full of peers they are already familiar with would not be a very meaningful interaction, and holds no communicative necessity.

In order to help gauge how often the English in the elementary classroom is actually being used for meaningful interactions, a number of questions were included in the survey to address this topic. Sur-

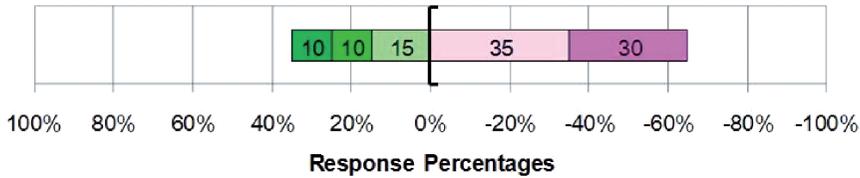
vey results in Chart 3.5 show some interesting correlations which we will consider further.

Chart 3.5

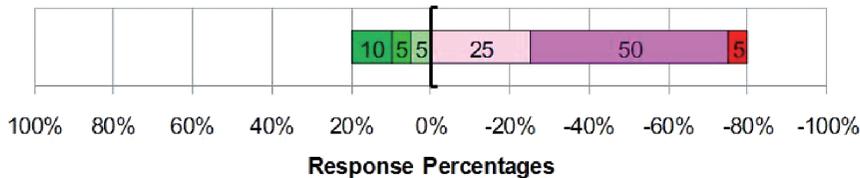
Q9: How often do you, as a teacher, use the English language to engage with your students in *meaningful interactions* in the classroom?



Q11: How often do you feel students have opportunities to interact with each other in *meaningful interactions* in the classroom?



Q12: How often do you feel students are provided opportunities to initiate *meaningful interactions* in the English classroom?



■ always
 ■ frequently
 ■ occasionally
 ■ rarely
 ■ very rarely
 ■ never

Only a slight majority of teachers claim that they themselves use English to engage with students in meaningful interactions, with 15% stating that they always do so and another 20% stating that they frequently do so. Conversely, 15% state that they very rarely do so in the classroom. The reported frequency of meaningful interactions decreases almost by half when teachers were asked about meaningful

student to student interactions, with 30% reporting that students very rarely were given chances to do so. The frequencies drop even further when teachers were asked how often their students themselves have opportunities to initiate meaningful interactions, with 80% reporting frequencies between rarely and never.

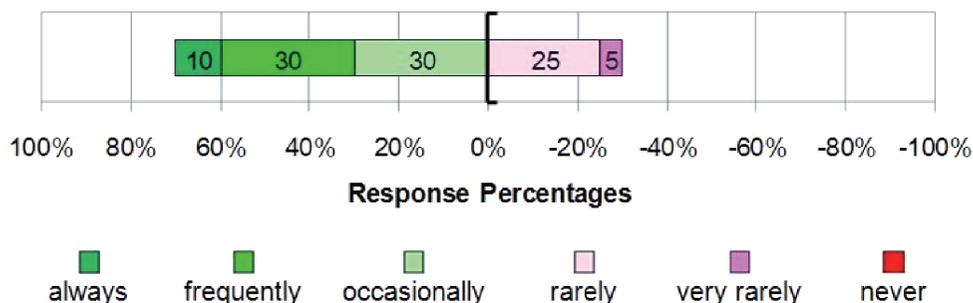
If we can assume that teachers have commonly understood what *meaningful interactions* entail from the definition that was provided to them with the survey, it is commendable that such a large percentage of them feel that they themselves meaningfully interact with students in English so often. However, if developing communicative ability truly is a goal of elementary school English, then even more opportunities need to be provided for students to engage which each other in such meaningful interactions.

Obviously, the language level of beginning students is limiting as to what extent they can interact in English. However, without any opportunities to do so using and experimenting with the language they *do* have, students will not be able to develop the discourse strategies that are necessary for a complete range of communicative abilities.

Using English not only for the lesson's designated 'target language', but also for activity instruction or class management is regarded as one of the best opportunities for students to develop L2 skills in the classroom (Harbord, 1992 : 351). Some of the survey questions were interested in seeing how teachers dealt with L2 use beyond the target language identified in the syllabus.

Chart 3.6

Q13: How often do you use English in the classroom to explain activities or game rules, to talk about subject matter, or in dealing with classroom management?



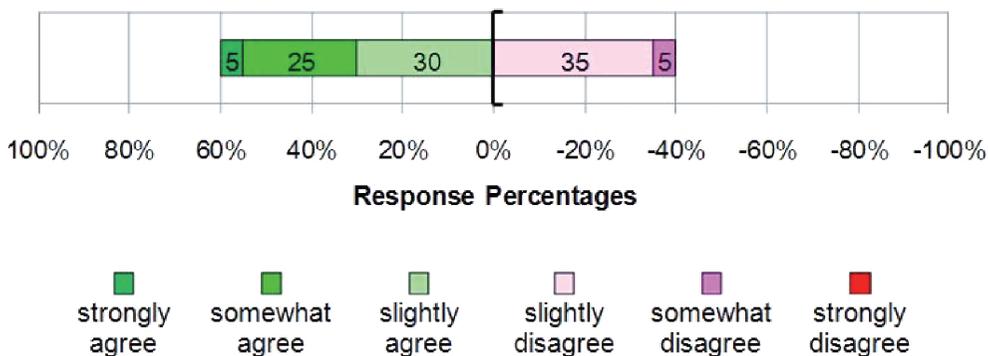
As we can see in Chart 3.6 above, 30% of teachers report frequently using English for explanations and classroom management, with only 10% claiming they do so all the time. While such percentages are encouraging, it would seem that within such contexts, that all teachers should take more advantage using L2 in these routines as 'they allow the child to actively make sense of new language from familiar experience' (Cameron, 2001 : 11).

Considering that MEXT advises that its prescribed materials and curriculum be used as more of a

guideline than the rule, a number of the survey questions were also oriented as to discover how teachers feel about the MEXT materials. When directly asked if they taught only the language items identified in the MEXT materials, teachers responses were divided, with the majority of responses near the axis of neutrality on the issue (see Chart 3.7). However, responses were slightly weighted with 60% in agreement that they used the MEXT materials as is.

Chart 3.7

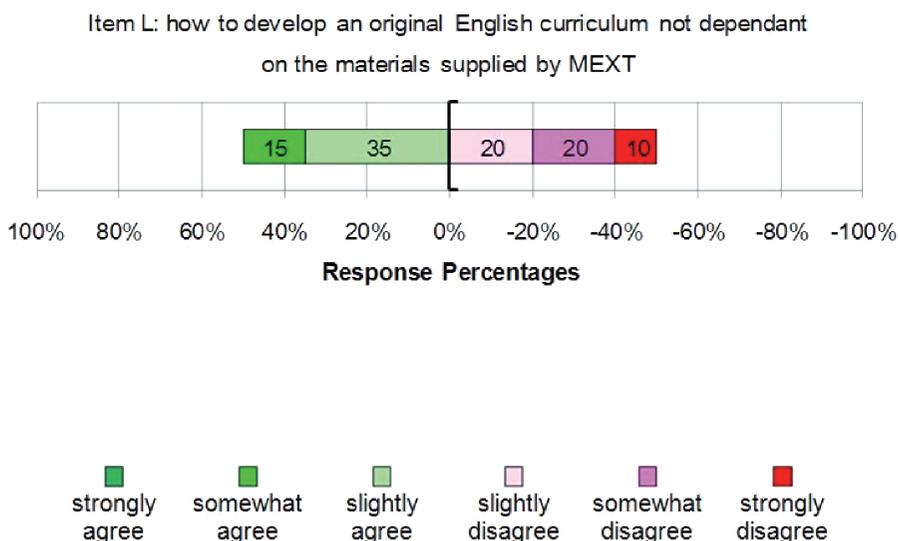
Q5: Do you teach only the language items that are prescribed in the MEXT English textbook?



In a similar vein, teachers were asked if they felt that training and workshops on developing an English curriculum not dependent on the materials provided by MEXT would benefit their ability to teach English. Once again the responses were split, this time 50/50, although those responders that disagreed felt more strongly about their opinion and those that agreed, as shown in Chart 3.8.

Chart 3.8

Q28: What types of teacher training and / or workshops (if any) do you think would be beneficial to you in teaching English in your current teaching context?



Although the responses regarding the use of a syllabus or materials other than those provided by MEXT were not definitive towards agreement or disagreement, the comparison does reveal a disparity in thinking. These survey results also affirm that a majority of teachers do use the materials as is, and that they do not feel that developing an original curriculum would be of benefit.

Perhaps responses such as these are to be expected, as only teachers with more confidence and experience in teaching English may decide to experiment with materials other than those provided by MEXT. Unfortunately, unless more teachers begin to concern themselves more with alternative pedagogies that help to develop their students' communicative abilities, merely covering the material exactly as the teachers guide always suggests will do very little in helping JTEs attend to their own students' varied needs.

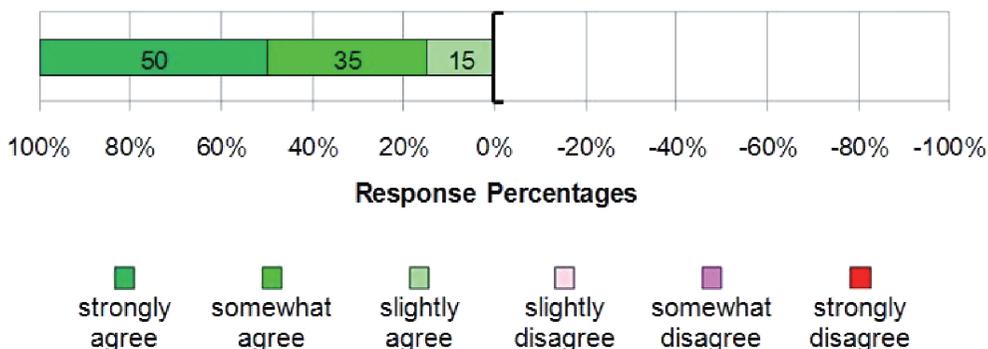
So far, the survey results we have analyzed have shown to varying degrees how teachers feel they are attending to developing their students' communicative abilities. We have seen some teachers report that they do use methodologies that would be conducive to developing communication abilities. However, we have also seen that there is a sizeable percentage of teachers that are, to varying degrees, not implementing such pedagogy.

It is therefore interesting to see, in Chart 3.9 below, that *all* teachers report they feel the methods and activities they personally use are beneficial to developing their students' communicative abilities, with 50% in strong agreement that they do so. Considering the ineffectiveness of some of the methods

identified in this paper so far, the survey results here are likely due to teachers being unaware of what types of pedagogy actually do contribute to communicative ability and those that do not.

Chart 3.9

Q5: Do you feel that the teaching methods or activities you personally use to teach English are beneficial to developing students' communicative abilities?

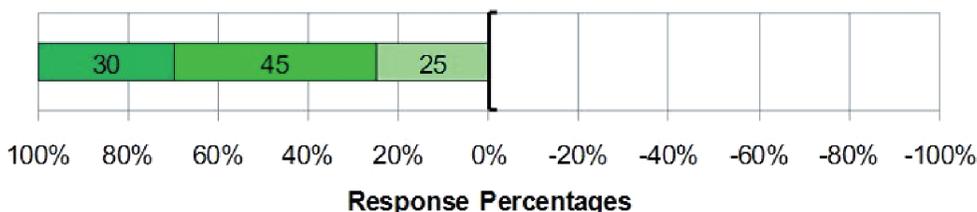


In the survey responses that have been evaluated so far, there does seem to be a percentage of teachers who claim to support and be providing for meaningful communicative opportunities in L2 for their students. However, there are many responses that also identify teachers who are not doing so. Interestingly enough, as shown in Chart 3.10, *all* the respondents are in agreement that students' English communicative abilities can be improved through increased opportunities to both listen to and speak English.

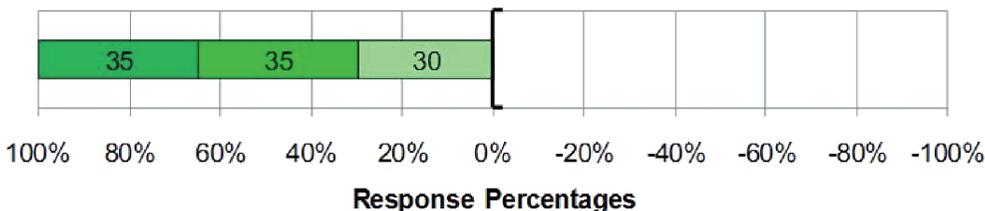
Chart 3.10

Q27: How important do you think the following categories are in helping to improve your own student's English communicative ability?

Item H: more opportunities for students to listen to English



Item I: more opportunities for students to speak English



strongly agree
 somewhat agree
 slightly agree
 slightly disagree
 somewhat disagree
 strongly disagree

It is perplexing then, that although all teachers are in agreement that increasing such opportunities would be of communicative benefit, they don't feel as strongly that increasing the number of English classes above the 35 hours per year would be as much of a benefit. It is additionally concerning that despite the belief that more opportunities to speak and listen to English are advantageous, that teachers

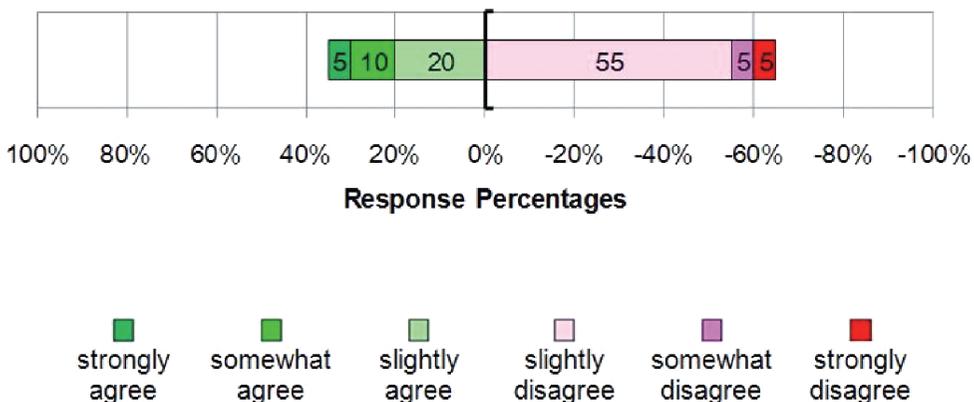
report giving students few opportunities to interact and initiate meaningful English interactions, as previously show in Chart 3.5, as well as not using English themselves more in activity instruction and classroom management, as shown in Chart 3.6.

In fact, according to the survey, the majority of teachers (65%) disagree that increasing the number of English classes would help improve their students' communicate ability in English (Chart 3.11).

Chart 3.11

Q27: How important do you think the following categories are in helping to improve your own student's English communicative ability?

Item D: increasing the number of English classes within the academic year



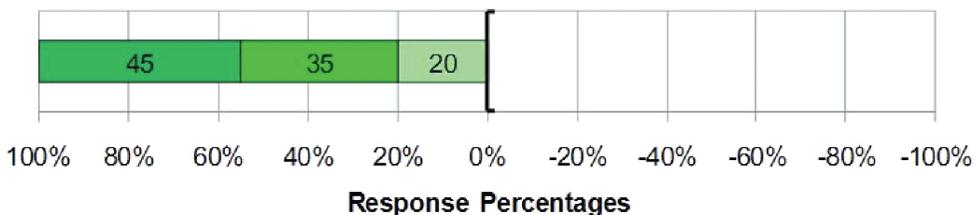
What these discrepancies bring us to are issues that have been skirted so far not only in the analysis of these questionnaire responses, but also by MEXT in their implementation of the elementary English curriculum throughout Japan. Those issues being disparities in Japanese teachers' own lack of communicative English abilities, as well as their lack of EFL pedagogical know-how, in particular pedagogy in relation to developing young learners' communicative abilities.

To support this claim, the questionnaire reveals that teachers themselves are aware of their need for further training. As shown in Chart 3.12, all teachers are in general agreement, with 45% in strong agreement, that additional teacher training would help in improving their students' communicative abilities. Likewise, all teachers agree their students would also benefit if they themselves could improve their own English conversation skills. In fact, one JTE states this directly in the free comments section of the questionnaire, "as the teacher, I feel that I have poor (English) communication skills." These responses are indicative that the JTE's own English communicative abilities may not be of an acceptable standard to teach EFL.

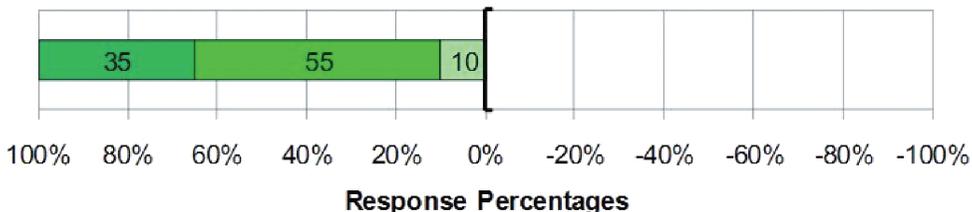
Chart 3.12

Q27: How important do you think the following categories are in helping to improve your own student's English communicative ability?

Item A: further teaching training in teaching foreign languages



Item C: improving your own English conversation skills



■ strongly agree
 ■ somewhat agree
 ■ slightly agree
 ■ slightly disagree
 ■ somewhat disagree
 ■ strongly disagree

In this section, results of a survey taken by elementary school JTEs helped to shed some light on their opinions regarding EFL goals and their implementation of certain teaching methodologies. It also showed how teachers feel about the need for more training. Although there was some general agreement in opinion on some topics, there were just as many where teacher opinion seemed to vary greatly. Such inconsistencies highlight the disparity in teachers' attitudes, methodologies, know-how, and abilities in EFL teaching.

In the next section, I will draw connections between relevant research and data in elementary EFL teaching to the issues that have been exposed in the analysis of the questionnaire responses.

4. Discussion

Teachers responses to the questions posed to them have identified a number of concerns in Japan's first steps into attempting to develop elementary students' communicative English abilities.

One apparent issue is in MEXT's granting freedom to individual schools to adapt the officially-provided English Notebook materials as they see fit. Although it is admirable that MEXT is permitting schools to implement the materials as per their students' needs, the leeway granted in this system can also be seen as fundamentally problematic, particularly considering the reported lack of EFL theory and teacher training that MEXT has provided. As such, the educational decisions being made at the local level are many times made in the absence of pertinent EFL knowledge and pedagogy. Researchers such as Kizuka (2009), argue that the freedom granted to schools and boards of education in their realization of the English Notebook curriculum only contributes to the confusion of how and what to teach as well as to the increasing disparity between classroom practice and student abilities nationwide.

Perhaps one of the most interesting points of the new Course of Study guidelines is that the existing 5th and 6th grade homeroom teachers have been made responsible for teaching English lessons. However, the reality is that most of these teachers themselves have very little training in teaching English (Tahira, 2012 : 6). Many teachers also feel that they themselves do not have English competency levels adequate to for teaching EFL (Butler, 2004). The enormous responsibility assigned to these unprepared homeroom teachers continues to be an immense source of stress in their teaching careers. So much so that some have considered early retirement (AERA, 2008 cited in Hall et al., 2012 : 204).

Beyond the sparse teaching suggestions included with the English Notebook materials, MEXT has provided minimal training in English teaching methodologies. One would think that adequate teacher training for these new 'draftees' into EFL teaching should be of utmost importance. However, policy has seemingly passed this responsibility onto local boards of education, who also receive little support from MEXT in such regards.

There has been such a high demand for clarification of how to implement the new English lessons at the elementary level, as well as a call for further teacher training, that the national government proposed an updated course of action less than a year into the new elementary English program. According to MEXT's Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency in June 2011 (MEXT, 2012a), in order to reinforce the English skills and instruction abilities of English school teachers, they have proposed the following :

- providing education boards and schools with useful information for implementation of training
- providing education boards and schools specific lesson models and language activity concepts based on the courses of study, including DVD recordings of actual classes
- encouraging English teachers to take external English certification and proficiency tests

It is encouraging to see MEXT taking initiative in response to the call for help, although it still remains to be seen if and how these proposals will be realized. Even if enacted, there is concern that these, or any other teacher training solutions will find meager resources, as it has been noted that 'with public spending on education at only 3.4 percent of GDP, Japan ranks in at the lowest amongst industrialized nations' (Stewart, 2009 : 11).

Certainly, even beyond the need for teacher training, another major concern for the development of communicative ability is the paltry 35 annual class hours currently allocated to elementary English lessons in Japan. This equivocates to less than one class hour per week devoted to a language that elementary students have little to no exposure to outside of the classroom in Japan. Comparatively, recent statistics show that in most of Europe, foreign language studies (typically English) start with an average of 29-54 annual class hours at the 1st and 2nd grade of elementary school, building up to 47-83 annual class hours by the time they are in 5th grade (Education, Audiovisual, and Culture Executive Agency, 2012 : 111). In extreme examples such as Luxembourg, students start with 360 annual class hours in the 1st grade, working their way up to 432 annual class hours of English by the time they are in 5th grade (Education, Audiovisual, and Culture Executive Agency, 2012 : 112). Another important consideration is that in many European countries, unlike Japan, students are also frequently exposed to English *outside* of the classroom as well.

To juxtapose the 35 annual class hours currently allotted by MEXT, a formal study by Thomas and Collier (1997) suggests that 8-11 year old ESL students require 1-3 hours of additional English support *per day* (365-1095 hours per year) for 5-7 years (total of 1,825 -7,665 hours) to test at grade level in English. It certainly seems that increasing the number of classroom hours allocated to English should be a major priority if MEXT truly hopes to be able to develop even basic communicative ability at the elementary school level.

Considering the realizations of elementary EFL education depicted in the questionnaire results, and comparing those to relevant research and the examples of other nations, it appears that Japan still has great challenges ahead of it in effectively developing students' communicative abilities.

5. Conclusion

As identified in this paper, compulsory English education at the elementary school level in Japan seems to be off to a shaky start. The obstacles are many : teachers' sparse training in teaching EFL, their own questionable English abilities, the varied interpretations of what is actually to go on in the language classroom, as well as the limited class hours being devoted to English studies. Can we reasonably expect students to develop any degree of communicative ability under such circumstances?

Fortunately, there are recent undertakings that show the development of elementary students' communicative abilities is not an impossible goal in Japan. Researchers such as Yukawa in her YTK project have already displayed that with appropriate training and teaching methodology, Japanese elementary students are able to maintain simple meaningful conversations in English (2010).

Hence, the call is for more support and teaching training for Japanese elementary teachers. If Japan truly hopes to develop English communicative ability at the elementary school level, it needs to

start by enabling its teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to achieve the task it has assigned to them. Just as the students, teachers also need to establish themselves as learners and as communicative participants in the cooperative development of meaning in this new national endeavor.

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