

Foreign Language (English) Education in Elementary School

In FY 2013, foreign language activities for fifth and sixth grade elementary school students became compulsory (“English language to be taught, in principle, in the foreign language activities” as indicated in the current courses of study, and although English is the primary foreign language which is being taught, there are a number of schools, albeit a few, which teach foreign languages other than English. However, even in these cases, these foreign languages are taught in addition to English. Moreover, “foreign language activities” are not taught as a formal subject but as with “morals” and “special activities” are treated as coming under the category of a “field”, and therefore, are not subject to a grading curve). In the next courses of study to be introduced in FY 2020, foreign language activities will be brought forward to commence at the level of third and fourth grade elementary school, and for fifth and sixth grade students, foreign languages will be treated as a formal subject.

This paper will give an overview with regard to foreign language education in elementary school discussing the background leading up to the introduction of foreign languages in the middle grades and foreign languages being treated as a formal subject in the upper grades.

April 23, 1986	<p>“Second Report on Educational Reform”, Ad Hoc Council for Education</p> <p>Chapter 1 (3) of Part 3 entitled “Review of Foreign Language Education” contains the recommendation, “First, the points which require improvement are the fact that English education in lower secondary and upper secondary school, etc. puts too much of an emphasis on acquiring knowledge of grammar and cultivating reading comprehension skills, and opportunities are lacking at university to apply practical English skills. In the future, we aim to clarify the purpose of English education for each educational stage, and to review the educational content adapting to the diverse abilities and career paths of the learners and moreover, to proceed with studies on the appropriate starting time for English language education. At such time, studies will also be conducted on improving teaching methods such as setting a fixed period of intensive learning.”</p>
August 7, 1987	<p>“Fourth Report on Educational Reform” (Final Report), Ad Hoc Council for Education</p> <p>Recommendation on the need for the development of “language skills, self-expression skills enabling real communication with other cultures” since “deeply understanding a variety of different cultures and developing international communication skills enabling adequate real communication is essential”.</p>
December 12, 1991	<p>“Second Report on Administrative Reform in Response to Internationalization and Focusing on People’s Lives”, Ad Hoc Administrative Reform Promotion Council Report</p> <p>Recommendation to “promote special activities for foreign language conversation, such as English conversation even in elementary school” and to “consider the formation of a new formal subject that aims to develop the ability to communicate in a foreign language such as through English conversation”.</p>

April 1992～	Designation of research and development schools which experimentally introduce English language education as a component of education on international understanding.
July 30, 1993	<p data-bbox="331 241 1449 376">“Ways to Improve Foreign Language Education in Lower Secondary School and Upper Secondary School (Report)”, Research Collaborators Conference on Improving Foreign Language Education</p> <p data-bbox="331 387 1449 427">On the issue of the appropriate starting age for foreign language studies</p> <p data-bbox="331 439 1449 712">1. Children have a fresh interest in foreign languages and straightforward expression skills, and since they have the ability to flexibly absorb vocal sounds, they are suited to learning a foreign language. Therefore, the idea is that if foreign language education starts from the elementary school stage, the students will be able to further develop their abilities in lower secondary and upper secondary school, and therefore, the foreign language skills of Japanese people will see significant improvement.</p> <p data-bbox="331 723 1449 902">On the other hand, there is also the thinking that the focus at the elementary school stage should first be on developing communication skills in the Japanese language, and that there is the need for careful consideration from the point of view of placing too much of a burden on children’s learning.</p> <p data-bbox="331 913 1449 1187">2. When it comes to teaching a foreign language as a formal subject in elementary school, in addition to the abovementioned problems, a large number of issues have been raised as requiring consideration such as the issue of considering the basic direction and objectives of elementary school education, the issue of securing teachers, the issue of the goals, content and grading if foreign language is to be treated as a subject, and the issue of its position in relation to other subjects.</p> <p data-bbox="331 1198 1449 1332">Based on such points of view, it is first and foremost essential to further compile practical research, and appropriate to enhance research practices taking advantage of the system of research and development schools.</p> <p data-bbox="331 1344 1449 1473">At such time, in order to have more in-depth research content, it is necessary to carry out practical research which enables a variety of wide-ranging endeavors such as initiatives during class time, and initiatives as extracurricular activities.</p>
July 19, 1996	<p data-bbox="331 1491 1449 1576">“The Direction of Japan’s Education with a View to the 21st Century”, First Report of the Central Council for Education</p> <p data-bbox="331 1588 1449 1767">Treatment of Foreign Language Education in Elementary School of Section 3, “Improvement of Foreign Language Education” of Chapter 2, “Internationalization and Education” of Part 3, “The Direction of Education in Response to Globalization, Information Technology, Developments in Science and Technology and Other Social Changes”</p> <p data-bbox="331 1778 1449 1912">At the elementary school level, the handling of foreign language education is a very important agenda item.</p> <p data-bbox="331 1924 1449 2002">Even in this Council, various studies were carried out based on the research outcomes of the research and development schools and through carrying out hearings from experts.</p>

	<p>As a result, foreign language education in elementary school is not to be uniformly implemented as a formal subject, but is to be taught as a component of international understanding education utilizing the time set aside for general studies, and it is believed that it is appropriate to provide opportunities in the time set aside for special activities for the children to have contact with foreign languages, such as through English conversation, or opportunities to familiarize themselves with foreign lifestyles and culture geared to the actual situation of the schools and regions.</p> <p>With regard to uniformly teaching foreign language education at the elementary school level as a formal subject, there are obvious benefits in terms of absorbing the pronunciation of foreign words and also in terms of enhancing the effects of foreign language education later in lower secondary school onwards, but the abovementioned conclusions were reached after taking into consideration the related problems of increasing the studies of children in elementary school and carefully selecting the educational content and reducing the number of class hours in elementary school, the importance of developing Japanese language skills at the elementary school stage, and the thinking that it is important to deal with foreign language education through improvement from lower secondary school onwards.</p> <p>In elementary school, when carrying out activities which allow children to familiarize themselves with foreign languages and foreign lifestyles and culture, it would be best to promote the employment of native speakers and local people with experience of living abroad. In addition, what is important in these activities is to cultivate an interest and involvement in different languages and culture in the children through interaction with native speakers, etc., and for example, to pay attention so as to avoid drilling knowledge of grammar and vocabulary into the children.</p> <p>Furthermore, in order to promote these educational activities at each school, it is also necessary to promote research and development on activities and teaching methods such as through conducting research at the research and development schools.</p>
<p>July 29, 1998</p>	<p>“On Improving the Standards of the Curriculum of Kindergartens, Elementary Schools, Lower Secondary Schools, Upper Secondary Schools, Schools for the Blind, Schools for the Deaf and Schools for Disabled Children”, Report of the Curriculum Council</p> <p>1. (3) Basic Thinking on the Key Issues for Each School Stage and Subject of The Policy for Improvement of the Standards of the Curriculum (Responding to Internationalization)</p> <p>With regard to the handling of foreign languages in elementary school, the thinking is that there is a need to ensure that children have contact with foreign languages, familiarize themselves with foreign lifestyles and culture and for experiential learning activities appropriate for the elementary school level to be carried out as a component of international understanding education during the “general studies hours” or hours set aside for special activities according to the actual circumstances of the school.</p>
<p>December</p>	<p>Public Notice on the Courses of Study</p>

1998	
	<p>The general rules of the newly established “general studies class hours” provide as one item of handling that “if foreign language conversation, etc. is to be provided as one component of studies relating to international understanding, experiential learning appropriate for the elementary school level is to be carried out such as allowing children to have contact with foreign languages and familiarize themselves with foreign lifestyles and culture according to the actual circumstances of the school”.</p>
April 2000	Specification for the system of research and development schools (experimental schools) regarding “English lessons” in the elementary level.
January 2001	<p>Commencement of distribution of “Guidance on Elementary School English Activity Practices” to the prefectural boards of education</p> <p>There is a description here that the main objective should not be language acquisition, but rather it is more important to aim to develop interest, involvement and motivation, and the objective is to implement activities which focus on the handling of English and vocal sounds in children’s everyday lives.</p>
January 17 2001	<p>Advisory Council Report on Promoting Improvement of English Teaching Methods (establishment of the Advisory Council on January 17, 2000)</p> <p>Recommendation to promote “English language education that is consistent throughout each school stage” since “taking into account the importance of proactive communication, having each and every citizen learn communication skills in a foreign language, particularly English, according to their individual needs, is becoming increasingly more important”.</p> <p>With regard to the handling of English language at the elementary school stage, a recommendation was made that there is a need for a proactive review in the future, which includes the possibility of English language education as a formal subject while bearing in mind the state of implementation of English conversation studies in the “general studies class hours” and the nature of language acquisition by children and, in addition, the need for proactive review with respect to the requests of the teachers.</p>
April 2002	Introduction of English activities using the “general studies class hours”.
July 12, 2002	<p>Formulation of a Strategic Framework for the Development of Japanese Nationals with English Competence”</p> <p>Amidst the rapid globalization of the economy and society, in order for children to be able to survive in the 21st century, it is necessary for children to acquire communication skills in “English” which has become a universal language, and this is an extremely important challenge not only for the future of our children but for the further development of our country, and therefore a concrete action plan needs to be drawn up in order to fundamentally improve English language education for Japanese people.</p> <p>A survey was conducted on the state of the implementation of English language activities in elementary school in the process of drawing up the action plan, and it was</p>

	found that approximately 88 percent of the country's elementary schools had implemented some form of English language activity.
March 31, 2003	<p>Formulation of an Action Plan for the Development of "Japanese Nationals with English Competence"</p> <p>"Teaching by a foreign instructor, a person fluent in English or a lower secondary school English teacher of about one-third of the English language activities with regard to elementary schools conducting English conversation activities in the "general studies class hours" was set as a goal for the English conversation support activities of elementary schools. In addition, a recommendation was made to create a guide for the improvement of teaching methods, to carry out a survey on the state of implementation and content of the English conversation activities, and to continue to promote the system of research and development schools.</p>
April 1, 2003	Along with the enforcement of the Act on Special Districts for Structural Reform, special districts (eight ward districts) were accredited to carry out the formulation of a flexible and diverse curriculum for the courses of study such as the implementation of English language education in elementary school.
June 2004	<p>Implementation of an awareness survey on English language education in elementary school</p> <p>A survey was conducted on English language education in elementary school with the aim of employing the survey results in enhancing and improving foreign language education in the future by keeping track of the awareness of the children, parents and teachers,.</p>
October 26, 2005	<p>"Creating Compulsory Education for a New Era", Central Council for Education Report</p> <p>A recommendation was made on the "need to enrich English language education at the elementary school stage in response to a global society" and specialized research is required for specific implementation methods.</p>
March 2006	<p>Report on English Language Education in Elementary School (state of deliberations by the Foreign Language Expert Group)</p> <p>For English language education in elementary school, "it is necessary to clarify the educational goals and then improve and enhance the educational content and teaching methods based on the viewpoint of 1) taking advantage of the flexible adaptability of elementary school students; 2) responding to the progress of globalization; and 3), securing equal opportunities for education. For this, since there are calls to respond appropriately and in a timely manner to the progress of globalization and bearing in mind that the circumstances of the schools will vary throughout the country from the vantage point of equal opportunities for education, there is a need to maintain a medium-term outlook based on studies on necessity in terms of education and evaluations of the activities of the research and development schools, etc. and to proceed with studies so that sufficient results will be achieved as a whole."</p>

	<p>With the “upper grade students, it is thought that there is a substantial need to enrich English language education from the viewpoint of ensuring a smooth transition from lower secondary school. Taking into account that the current number of hours of implementation of English language activities is, on average, 13.7 unit hours (in the case of sixth-grade students) and considering the need to secure a certain unity with the educational content, the Foreign Language Expert Group believes that there is a need to consider setting common educational content, for example, for 35 unit hours per year (average of once a week).</p> <p>At such time, foreign languages shall be put in the category of “a field” or taught in the time set aside for “general studies”, and with regard to treating foreign languages as a formal subject, further research is needed on educational content and learning evaluations, and while evaluating the state of implementation, it is considered that further review is appropriate as a future agenda issue”.</p> <p>“In the middle grades and lower grades, it is considered that there is a need to enhance English language education, which is currently being implemented mainly as special activities in the lower grades and in the general studies class hours in the middle grades.</p> <p>At such time, although it is considered appropriate to take advantage of the flexible adaptability which children possess at this age, there is also a need to take into account thorough acquisition of the Japanese language. With regard to the positioning of foreign languages in the educational curriculum and the handling of class hours, since there is a need to formulate a far-seeing organic curriculum which looks to the upper grades, and to evaluate it, there is a need to further review the practices of the research and development schools, and while taking into account the issues in terms of educational conditions, there is a need for the Expert Group to continue with their studies.</p>
<p>January 17, 2008</p>	<p>“On Improving the Courses of Study of the Kindergartens, Elementary Schools, Lower Secondary Schools, Upper Secondary Schools and Schools for Special Needs Education”, Central Council for Education Report</p> <p>Foreign language activities at the elementary school stage</p> <p>“In Japan, foreign language education starts from lower secondary school, and currently, in lower secondary school, students first come into contact with rudimentary foreign language learning, such as self-introductions. However, these kinds of activities are thought to be more appropriate as activities at the elementary school level. (Omission) It is thought that creating a foundation to develop communication skills in lower and upper secondary school is important through the provision of opportunities to come into contact with and experience foreign languages at the elementary school level.”</p> <p>“For elementary school students (omission), it has been pointed out that there is more of a need to focus on developing the attitude of proactively trying to communicate through the utilization of ALTs.”</p> <p>“At the elementary school level, in order to take advantage of the flexible adaptability</p>

		<p>that elementary school students possess, encourage their awareness of words and cultivate a foundation of wide-ranging language skills and an international sense, rather than simply pre-teaching English language education such as grammar taught at the lower secondary school stage, and it is thought appropriate to conduct foreign language activities with the goal of deepening understanding of language and culture, including Japanese language and culture, and of cultivating an attitude of proactive communication.”</p> <p>“It is considered appropriate to secure a fixed number of class hours (35 unit hours a year, equivalent to 1 period per week) for the upper grades separate from the hours set aside for general studies, and not to categorize foreign languages as a formal subject.”</p> <p>“With regard to the teachers, it is thought that, for the time being, as with the current measures being taken by the schools, the base should be that the classroom teacher (the assigned teacher depending on the actual circumstances of the school), leads the lessons through team-teaching with ALTs and local people who are fluent in English.”</p> <p>“In introducing foreign language activities at the elementary school stage, it is important that elementary and lower secondary schools ensure close cooperation.”</p>
March 2008		<p>Public Notice on the New Courses of Study</p> <p>Implementation of one period per week of foreign language activities targeting fifth and sixth grade elementary school students from FY 2011.</p>
May 26, 2008		<p>First Report of the Meeting on Education Rebuilding</p> <p>Fundamentally review English language education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Set a target for achievement in each step of elementary school, lower and upper secondary school and university; reinforce English-language education in all steps while requiring consistency with national language education. - (Set a large number (5,000) of model schools that conduct English-language education for the third grade of elementary school and above.)
May 28, 2009		<p>Fourth Report of the Meeting on Education Rebuilding</p> <p>Fostering human resources who can work internationally</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In order to enhance foreign language education at elementary schools prior to the introduction of the new Courses of Study, training for teachers should be carried out systematically, and guidance by ALTs and lower secondary school English teachers and the development and utilization of ICT equipment should be further promoted.
June 30, 2011		<p>“Five Recommendations and Concrete Measures for Improvement of the Skills of English as a Universal Language”, Report of the Study Group on Improvement of Foreign Language Skills</p> <p>“Efforts of society as a whole in order to develop language skills for English as a universal language”:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Monitor and verify the state of progress of the English proficiency required of the students. 2. Promote understanding of the need for English in a global society vis-à-vis the students

	<p>and improve motivation for English language learning.</p> <p>3. Increase the number of opportunities for students to use English through effective utilization of ALTs and ICT, etc.</p> <p>4. Aim to strengthen the English language skills and teaching of teachers of English and aim for strategic improvement of English language education in schools and regions.</p> <p>5. Aim for improvements so that university entrance exams are in tune with the global community.</p>
April 2012	Distribution to elementary schools throughout the country of “Hi, friends!” – materials for elementary school foreign language activities.
May 28, 2013	<p>“The Future of University Education”, Third Set of Recommendations of the Education Rebuilding Execution Committee</p> <p>Enhancing education in response to globalization from the elementary and secondary education stage.</p> <p>The central government is now studying the idea of radical expansion of English language learning in elementary school (such as implementation in the lower grades, an increase in teaching time, categorizing English language as a formal subject and assignment of full-time teachers) and implementation of English classes in English in junior high school, and organic English language education from elementary through to secondary education, with a view to revising the courses of study while referring to the examples of English language education in other countries. The central government and local governments are developing an English teaching system with smaller classes, expansion of the assignment of native speakers, for example, through expansion of the JET program and increasing the number of opportunities to come into contact with English through such forums as English camps.</p> <p>The central government has been promoting credits for English courses taught by native speakers during the training of teachers of English. The central government and local governments have been improving and reinforcing the training, including aiming to have English teachers acquire a target score in external exams such as the TOEFL (TOEFL iBT80 or higher) and sending English teachers abroad, and has also been promoting the use of external exams when screening teachers for employment.</p>
June 14, 2013	<p>Cabinet Approval for the Second Phase of the Basic Plan on the Promotion of Education</p> <p>Develop human resources who are able to work cooperatively with a variety of people in the global community, namely, the development of human resources who are able to engage in international negotiations and successfully lead the way in an international arena. Towards this, aim to improve language skills, including practical English skills.</p>
December 13, 2013	<p>Announcement of the “English Education Reform Implementation Plan in Response to Globalization”</p> <p>Achieve radical improvement of the entire English language system from elementary school through to lower and upper secondary school in order to develop an educational</p>

	<p>environment that is in tune with globalization from the elementary and secondary education stage, such as by expanding and strengthening English language education in elementary school and implementing more advanced English education in lower and upper secondary school</p> <p>1. The direction of new English language education in response to globalization</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Middle grades of elementary school: activity type <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approximately 1 or 2 periods a week, cultivating a foundation for communication skills and teaching mainly by the classroom teacher ○ Higher grades of elementary school: subject type <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Approximately 3 periods a week (utilization of “module lessons”) - Cultivate a command of rudimentary English skills <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In addition to the classroom teacher possessing English teaching skills, proactive use of teachers specializing in the subject <p>Note 1. Cultivate the ability to truly communicate in English by setting consistent learning goals through elementary school, lower secondary and upper secondary school.</p> <p>Note 2. Enhancement of education relating to identity as a Japanese national (emphasis on traditional culture and history).</p> <p>2. System development for the realization of a new form of English language education (proactive promotion from FY 2014)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reinforcement of the system of teaching in elementary schools <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Measures for additional allocation and development training of leaders to promote English language education in elementary schools - Improve the teaching of teachers specializing in the subject - Improve the English language teaching skills of elementary school classroom teachers - Develop and provide video teaching materials for training - Improve and enhance teacher training courses and employment
<p>September 26, 2014</p>	<p>“Experts Group on the Direction of English Language Education”, Research Collaborators Conference (Elementary and Secondary Education)</p> <p>The courses of study indicate the aim of having consistent educational goals through elementary school and lower and upper secondary school from the viewpoint of 1) providing a smooth transition of learning through each stage of school and 2) “being able to do something using English”.</p> <p>Start foreign language activities from the middle grades of elementary school, cultivate a foundation for communication skills while becoming used to vocal sounds and increase interest in words. In the higher grades, in addition to “listening” and “speaking” through basic expression of familiar topics, cultivate a foundation for communication skills including the development of a habit of “reading” and “writing”. There is also a need to treat foreign languages as a formal subject for the purpose of ensuring organic learning.</p>

	<p>The class hours and categorization pertaining to English language education in elementary school will require further consideration in the future by experts in the overall discussions on the curriculum.</p> <p>If foreign languages are to become a formal subject in the higher grades of elementary school, verify advanced measures for appropriate methods of evaluation, and continue with studies.</p> <p>If foreign languages are to become a formal subject in the higher grades of elementary school, develop, verify and utilize necessary teaching materials, including the utilization of ICT, which are effective for learning.</p>
<p>November 20, 2014</p>	<p>“The Direction of the Standards of the Curriculum in Elementary and Secondary Education (Advice), Central Council for Education</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ In a global society, there is a need to consider how to go about developing the capabilities needed to express opinions and to interact with one another without hesitation in a foreign language, and a deep understanding of our own traditions and culture as well as an understanding of other cultures so as to be able to take the initiative in cooperating with people speaking different languages and from different cultures. <p>In particular, with regard to competence in English, which is a universal language, while taking into account the recommendations compiled in the report of the Experts Group on the Direction of English Language Education established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, consideration should also be given, for example, to tackling the following points.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Give consistent specific indicators pertaining to the four language skills for the educational goals to be achieved from elementary school through to upper secondary school from the perspective of “what one is able to do using English”. - In the middle grades of elementary school, start foreign language activities from the middle grades and familiarize students with vocal sounds, and in the upper grades, teach foreign languages as a formal subject from the perspective of having organic learning, and cultivate the ability to tell one another each other’s thoughts and feelings about familiar and simple things.
<p>August 26, 2015</p>	<p>Discussion Paper by the Special Committee on Curriculum Planning (Report)</p> <p>In light of the “qualities and abilities that are particularly required in this day and age”, there is a need to improve the related subjects and to visualize the relationship between the qualities and abilities that are cultivated by the specific teaching content in these subjects. Among these, in particular, in order to increase the skills relating to language so as to be able to understand and express one’s self in the Japanese language or a foreign language, there is a need to enhance both Japanese language education and foreign language education, to become aware of the features of and differences in the sounds, letters, characters, words, sentence structure, and forms of representation, and to effectively link Japanese language education and foreign language education so as to</p>

	enable understanding of the mechanics of language. The enhancement of foreign language education from the viewpoint of improving language skills is thought to also be greatly effective for the cultivation of an attitude of trying to proactively communicate and to improve Japanese language skills.
December 21, 2015	<p>“On Improving the Qualifications and Abilities of Teachers Responsible for the Future of School Education”, Central Council for Education Report</p> <p>“Improving Foreign Language Education”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Competence in response to foreign language education being taught at an earlier age and as a formal subject in elementary school. - Promote the development of “English language education promotion leaders” who are to be the teachers in the particular region, create teaching plans bearing in mind a transition through elementary school, lower secondary and upper secondary school and implement guidance and advice on improving lessons using learning goals.

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小学校における外国語教育について

2013年度から小学校5・6年生における外国語活動(現行の学習指導要領では、「外国語活動においては、英語を取り扱うことを原則とすること」としており、取り扱われる外国語は主として英語となっているが、それ以外の外国語を取り扱う学校も少数ながら存在する。ただしその場合でも英語の他に他言語を取り扱っている。また外国語活動は教科でなく、道徳や特別活動と同じ区分の「領域」となっており、相対的な評価は行われない。)が必修化され、2020年度から導入される次期学習指導要領では、外国語活動が小学校3・4年生からの開始に引き下げられ、小学校5年生・6年生は外国語科として教科化される運びとなっている。

本稿では小学校における外国語教育について、中学年からの導入と高学年での教科化に至るこれまでの経緯を時系列に沿って概観する。