

Summary of the “Research Report on the Survey on Elementary School English Education”

1. Purpose and Summary of the Research

(1) Purpose of the research study

Foreign language activities became compulsory for 5th and 6th grade elementary school students (upper grades) starting from FY2011. In addition, since November 2014, the Central Council for Education has been considering introducing foreign language activities into the earlier grades, and making foreign language activities an official subject in the upper grades as the future direction for the revision of the Courses of Study.

Amid such a situation, research is being carried out on introducing foreign language education into the earlier and middle grades of R&D experimental schools (including regional schools strengthening their English language education; hereinafter the same below) and implementing foreign language activities as an official school subject, and moreover, the same practices are also being carried out in the special curriculum schools. Therefore, in this research, we also attempted to ascertain and analyze the state of the advanced efforts of the special curriculum schools and R&D experimental schools, taking into consideration the deliberations of the Central Council for Education. In the analysis, we focused on the four aspects which are thought to serve as useful information when conducting English language education: the objectives, teaching methods, the instructors (including improving human resources development and teaching skills, and utilizing outside human resources), and evaluation.

In addition, we actually investigated the initiatives of the forward-thinking boards of education in Japan and efforts of the schools, and at the same time conducted a survey on the examples of initiatives of other countries. Based on these, through organizing and analyzing the issues from an objective standpoint looking at the examples of the goals, teaching methods, instructors and evaluation methods as seen from the perspective of collaboration between the elementary and lower secondary schools and the perspective of consistency in the goals, teaching and evaluations, we conducted a research study with the aim of providing useful information (evidence) and suggestions on policy for foreign language education in elementary school.

(2) Means used in the research study

1. Internet survey and questionnaires: Survey on the Actual State of Foreign Language Education in Elementary Schools (Special Curriculum Schools and R&D Experimental Schools)

An Internet survey was conducted using an online survey website of managerial staff and teachers of special curriculum schools and R&D experimental schools (2,031 schools) relating to

foreign language activities in elementary schools throughout the country. The response rate of the managerial staff survey was about 70%, and the response rate of the teachers' survey was about 90%.

The survey was conducted using a format where the children themselves were asked to respond to the questions. In the sampling of the targeted children, 100 schools were selected out of all of the schools (511 schools) whose managerial staff had agreed to participate in the Internet survey so that the sample size would be about 10,000 to 20,000 students, and a sample survey was created based on a quota sampling method. As a result, the number of children was 15,629, and the response rate was about 98%.

Both the Internet survey and questionnaire included the same questions as the survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in February, 2015, so that comparisons could be made.

2. Case study: advanced efforts of prefectures and municipalities

Case examples of Gifu, Kochi, Hiroshima prefectures, and Kyoto and Naruto cities, which have been undertaking advanced initiatives related to elementary school foreign language education were compiled subject to the following items. In compiling the case examples, we endeavored to pick out concrete examples as much as possible (examples of teaching materials, evaluations, etc.).

Timing of introduction, curriculum (number of class hours, teaching goals, teaching materials, teaching methods, evaluations), instructors, teacher training, implementation status of elementary school and lower secondary school cooperation, outcomes and issues

3. School-visit survey: efforts of schools in Japan and efforts in Shanghai, China

Out of the schools that cooperated with the Survey on the Actual State of Foreign Language Education in Elementary Schools (Special Curriculum Schools and R&D Experimental Schools), we selected three schools which had been conducting foreign language education from the 1st grades, and conducted a survey through visiting the schools, observing classes and interviewing the teachers, and compiled the results.

In addition, we had the opportunity to visit Shanghai, China, where we interviewed the principal of a university-affiliated foreign language experimental school, and the teachers in charge of foreign language (English) teaching, and the professors and students of the teacher training college, and compiled the results.

4. Literature survey (survey on the implementation status of elementary school English education in other countries (regions))

In compiling the implementation status of elementary school English education in other countries (regions), we chose countries which teach English as a foreign language like Japan rather than countries which aim to master English as a second language. The six selected countries (regions) were China, South Korea, Taiwan, Thailand, Vietnam, and Finland.

In summarizing the situation in each country (region), we organized the information on the pre-service training, in-service teacher training, educational goals, teachers in charge of teaching English, textbooks and evaluation methods, while referring to policy documents and previous research.

5. Holding of study groups (study of analysis of the survey results etc.)

[Project period: FY 2015 - 2016, Research Representative: Akiko Ono (Director of the Department for International Research and Cooperation)]

2. Brief Summary of the Research

(1) Current status and issues

Through the Courses of Study for Elementary Schools announced in the public notice of March 2008, foreign language activities were introduced into the upper grades, with full-scale implementation in the Courses of Study in 2011, and six years have passed since then. In the meantime, thanks to the efforts of the teachers of the elementary schools, we have made great achievements in terms of children's desire for learning in the foreign language activities, and have also become aware of the problems.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology conducted an awareness survey in February 2015 of the upper grade elementary school students, the teachers in charge of elementary school classes or specialist teachers teaching foreign language activities, elementary school managerial staff, 1st and 2nd grade lower secondary school students, the teachers in charge of lower secondary school English and lower secondary school managerial staff, and from the results the following situation and problems came to light.

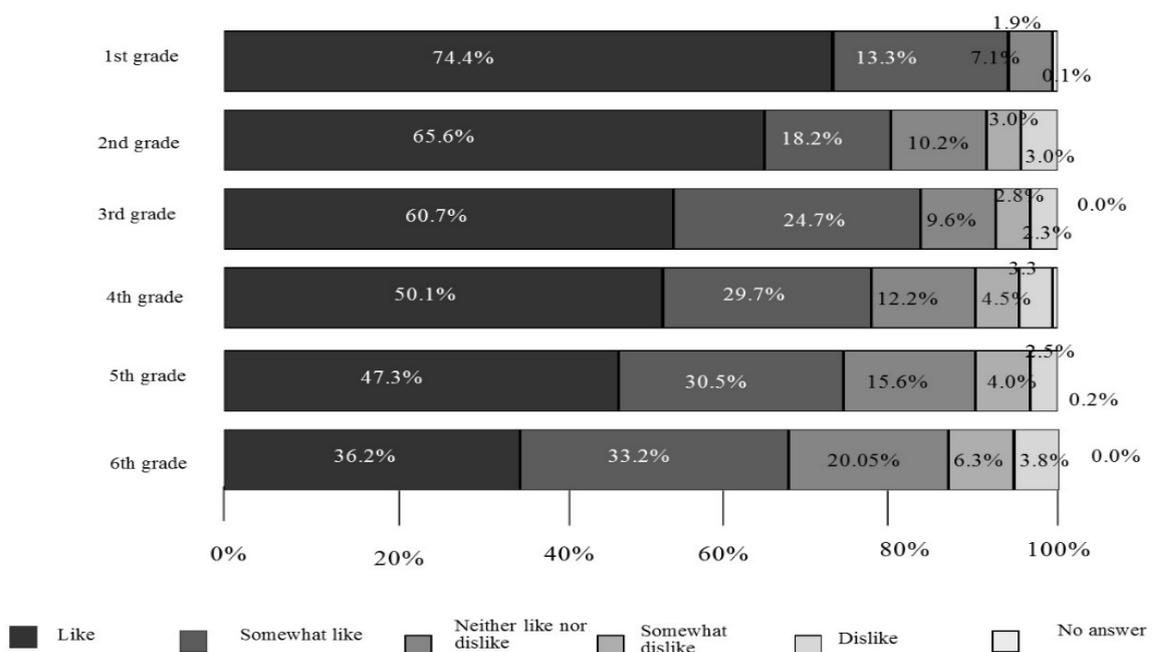
- Although we have achieved results in terms of willingness to learn, 10% of the children already feel like that they are poor at English or foreign language activities.
- We have seen improved results in relation to “familiarity with foreign languages” and “a positive attitude towards communication”.
- The goal of elementary school foreign language activities is “to get used to foreign vocal sounds and basic expressions”, and since the primary aim is not to build English language skills unlike with English education in lower secondary school and later, the end result has been that the children are developing the ability to listen and speak in English.
- What was learned mainly with vocal sounds in the foreign language activities of elementary school is not being sufficiently put to use in the lower secondary schools.
- There is the possibility that foreign language activities start and finish simply with songs and games, and that the children have not reached the level of being able to communicate their thoughts and feelings to their teachers and friends from their own standpoint.

(2) Summary of the results

(i) Findings of the Survey on the Actual State of Foreign Language Education in Elementary Schools (Special Curriculum Schools, and R&D Elementary Schools)

- While the teachers in charge of English in ordinary schools find themselves in a situation where they feel unable to actively participate due to difficulties with English themselves or due to modesty, the teachers responsible for English language education at the R&D experimental schools and special curriculum schools have a true sense of mission with regard to English language education.
- About 40% of the annual teaching plans are made by the local governments, and about 30% by the teachers of the schools.
- About 60% cite “specific activities” as training required needed by teachers.
- The following figure shows the relationship between the likes and dislikes of classes and the grade levels of the children.

Figure Likes and dislikes of classes by grade level



The results showed that the percentage of children who answered “Like” decreases as the grade level increases. However, when looking at the proportion of positive answers of “Like” and “Somewhat like”, they do not decline until the 3rd grade and even in the 6th grade 70% of the answers are positive answers. Conversely, the proportion of “Dislike” and “Somewhat dislike” was only about 10% even in the 6th grade which was the highest percentage. Moreover, for 5th and 6th grade students, the same questions were asked of all of the elementary schools across the country as in the survey of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology conducted in February 2015 as referred to in (1), but there was no huge difference in the proportion distribution between the special curriculum schools and R&D experimental schools, and elementary schools throughout the country.

- 55% of responding children answered, “I would answer in English if spoken to by a foreign national”, and therefore the motivation of children towards communicating in English is increasing.
- When comparing the specialized subject teachers and other teachers, the percentages for those holding a teaching license for English language teaching were 23% and 7%, which suggests that since there is an increasing number of elementary school teachers who have a teaching license for English language teaching, it will be possible to have higher quality English education and more flexible personnel placement.
- Eighty percent of the schools are evaluating sentences, and it seems that they are facing some difficulty in creating evaluation criteria based on the evaluations.
- It has been suggested that less than 30% of schools include “reading” and “writing” skills as target goals and this suggests that there is a need to increase the number of class hours.
- In the large cities, the percentage of schools that have started English language education from the upper grades is high.

(ii) Suggestions from the advanced examples of prefectures and cities

- The purpose of research and teaching is not solely for elementary school, but is intended to bear in mind connections to lower secondary school and upper secondary school.
- Each region has established its own organization and framework and built a teaching structure in order to facilitate cooperation between the elementary, lower secondary and upper secondary schools.
- Elementary schools in the same school district should be linked together through strong collaboration particularly in order to make connections to lower secondary school more effective.
- In terms of not only teaching but also evaluation, the efforts of elementary school can be utilized in lower secondary school and upper secondary school.

(iii) Findings from the status of implementation of elementary school English education in other countries (regions)

- Although the time of when foreign language education was established in compulsory education differs depending on the individual circumstances of the country, most countries began to focus on foreign language education, especially English education, from around 1990.
- The English language education efforts of elementary schools in the countries surveyed this time are considered to be five to 10 years ahead of Japan starting from the time of when elementary school English was made compulsory.
- Countries that introduced English language education into elementary schools in or after 1990 seemed, like Japan, to have faced difficulty with their pre-service training and in-service teacher training. Yet

some countries' reforms have been advancing at a rapid pace.

- Regarding the training of in-service teachers, there were many useful points of reference such as the use of across-the-board teacher training and specialized teachers, and the implementation of independent projects.
- What is useful is the incorporation of not only language skills and linguistic knowledge, but also emotional attitudes, learning strategies, cultural awareness, etc. in the goals, and moreover, expressing these points in a CAN-DO list of "being able to do something" as reference when setting goals.
- Regarding evaluations, various methods are being adopted depending on the country, but there are several countries that do not conduct an evaluation using a written examination or do not conduct an evaluation using numerical values, but instead show a very cautious attitude when it comes to developing and maintaining the desire to learn at the elementary school stage.