

English as a foreign language in early childhood care and education in Japan: Policy and pedagogy¹⁾

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Abstract

This paper gives an overview of English education policy and practice for young children in Japan. Recently, a strong need for English education has emerged and changes have been made at the elementary school levels. English education has not yet been regulated, however, in early childhood education. This study investigates English education for young children in Japanese preschool settings, in lessons for preschoolers provided outside of preschool, and in English preschools. The results show that English lessons are offered more widely at private institutions than in public, and a strong commercial involvement that makes English education hard to access for families with fewer economic resources and families with two working parents. The results also revealed issues of quality in instructional method and in teachers' skills. Although there is a wide gap in opportunities to learn English from an early age, the result in English knowledge and skill in latter education level do not yet differ. More practical research and policy studies are needed to provide equal educational opportunities and also methodologically and professionally appropriate English education for young Japanese children.

Keywords: *early childhood education, English as a foreign language education, education policy*

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Introduction

Recently, a lot of attention has been paid in Japan to English as a foreign language in early childhood education. The improvement of the command of English has been a major issue in Japanese society, in general. Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation), which is an influential and comprehensive economic organization, has been making recommendations on English education (Nippon Keidanren, 2000, 2005, 2006).

The revision of the national curriculum guideline, in 1998, by the Japanese Ministry of Education led to the introduction of English education as part of the education for international understanding in the subject called “Integrated Learning Period.” Since then, there have been considerable changes and improvements in the educational policy of the elementary school with regard to English education. An aural comprehension section was introduced into the national university examination in January 2006.

English education for preschool children, however, has been left to the private sphere. Neither the national education guideline for Kindergarten (Yochien) nor the one for day care center (Hoikusho) mention English education, at all. According to the data provided by the Benesse Education Research Center (2005), about 14.2% of young children in Japan take English lessons outside of school (Cf. 5.0% in the year 2000). This is especially true in urban areas, such as Tokyo, for example, where 17.8% of children had private lessons outside of school in 2005 (Benesse, 2005). According to the data collected by the Benesse Education Research Center in June 2007 (Benesse in press), 47.6% of private kindergarten (Yochien) and 16.7% of national and public kindergarten (Yochien) provide some kind of English activities (the collection rate 22.6%).

This paper, provide an overview of the English education for young children in Japan, starting with a present conditions of English education in the elementary school and current changes in educational policy. This will be followed by a discussion of the present conditions of English education in early childhood care and education institutions. Next, the relationship between commercialism and early child-

hood English education will be examined. Finally, recommendations and suggestions for the future will be presented.

English education in elementary schools: A focus on educational policy

After the 1998 revisions of the national curriculum guideline, English education was introduced in elementary schools. In 2002, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), formulated a strategy to cultivate “Japanese with English abilities” with the aim of drastically improving the English education in the country. They addressed five key policy issues (see Table 1 and http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/020/sesaku/020702.htm). In its action plan, the government promoted the employment of assistant language teachers (ALT), such as special part-time instructors in elementary schools, and allowed foreign instructors, fluent English speakers, or junior high school English teachers in one third of elementary school sessions in support of English conversation (MEXT, 2003). These lessons were to be carried out in the Period for Integrated Study.

The MEXT policies also supported research on English education in elementary schools. At the same time, the government equally emphasized the importance of cultivating Japanese-language abilities for appropriate expression and accurate comprehension. The action plan also included training for elementary school teachers to improve their knowledge and command of Japanese.

Table 1. *Key policy issues of “Japanese with English abilities” action plan*

1	Boosting the motivation of the learners
2	Improving the educational content, etc
3	Improving the qualifications of English instructors and upgrading the teaching system
4	Enhancing English conversation activities in elementary schools
5	Boosting Japanese-language ability

http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chousa/shotou/020/sesaku/020702.htm

About 50% of the elementary schools provided English education in “the Integrated Learning Period” in 2002; the number was more than 90% in 2004, and rose to 95.8% in 2006 (MEXT, 2007c). However, the average number of hours (classes) of English education at school as part of “the Integrated Learning Period” is only 10.4 hours per year for the third and fourth grade, 10.8 hours for the fifth grade, and 11.3 hours for the sixth grade, in 2004 (MEXT, 2005). According to the survey (MEXT 2007c), the most English activities taken in place in elementary school were singing and games. Easy greeting activities come next, and followed by exercise in articulation, real international exchange activities, and study on characters.

In 2004, the MEXT conducted a survey of parental views about English education in elementary schools. According to the survey, about 71% of the parents wanted English as a compulsory subject in the elementary school. In contrast, only 37% of elementary school teachers indicated that they would be in favor of English as a compulsory subject (MEXT, 2004b). The survey results show a wide gap between the views of parents and elementary school teachers.

The Central Education Council has been discussing the review of the compulsory subjects of elementary schools in order to add English, since 2004 (http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/index.htm). As a result of the discussion, the Central Education Council, as an advisory committee, has suggested that English should become a compulsory activity of elementary school education (The Central Education Council 2008. See also http://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/toushin/06051511.pdf). In the 2008 revisions of the national elementary school curriculum guideline, the new chapter on “Foreign language activities” was added. Foreign language activities to cultivate children’s communication ability will start in fifth and sixth grade from the year 2011 (MEXT, 2008a, see also http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/news/080424/001.pdf and http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/index.htm). There are two items listed as the contents of foreign language activities introduced in the 2008 revisions of the national curriculum guideline. One content is to fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages and the other is to deepening the understanding of language and culture through activities (MEXT, 2008a). In the national elementary

school curriculum guideline, English is not stated as a certain subject but as educational activities.

The conditions of English education in early childhood care and education institutions

English education in early childhood care and education settings (such as Yochien, Hoikusho, and Kodomoen) are not regulated in the national curriculum guideline. Though, 47.6% of private kindergarten (Yochien) and 16.7% of national and public kindergarten (Yochien) provide some kind of English activities (Benesse in press), not a lot of early childhood care and education institutions provide English education in their regular curriculum.

According to data from the kindergarten (Yochien) web site (<http://www.youchien.net/>) on private kindergartens, 406 of 7,710 private kindergartens provided English education as their regular activities (examined and calculated by author in 2007). There are 8,317 private kindergartens in Japan in 2006 (MEXT 2007a). There were 7,710 private kindergartens posted their data on the kindergarten (Yochien) web site. Based on information from this web site, 45 out of 868 (5.18%) in Tokyo, 38 out of 571 (6.65%) in Saitama, 23 out of 439 (5.24%) in Fukuoka, and 23 out of 511 (4.50%) in Kanagawa private kindergartens provide English lessons (see table 2). According to the data on the web site, there are 4 prefectures (out of 47 prefectures) with no kindergartens and 3 prefectures with only 1 kindergarten that provides English lessons at their kindergartens.

Usually these private kindergartens provide about 30 minutes/week of English classes with the help of assistant language teachers. Some kindergartens invite international students as part-time teachers. Although these teachers are native speakers, most have not been trained as language teachers. The class size is usually very large (30-35 students). Some private institutions hire English education companies, to provide their classes at their schools, in exchange for rental fees.

Table 2. *English education in kindergarten (yochien)*

Prefecture	#of kindergartens provide English education	#of kindergartens in the prefecture that announce the data to the site	%
TOKYO	45	868	5.18
SAITAMA	38	571	6.65
KANAGAWA	23	511	4.50
FUKUOKA	23	439	5.24
FUKUSHIMA	18	148	12.16
CHIBA	18	341	5.28
OSAKA	18	422	4.27
HIROSHIMA	17	202	8.42
HOKKAIDO	16	604	2.65
AICHI	16	412	3.88
SHIZUOKA	14	243	5.76
IYOGO	13	232	5.60
IBARAKI	10	187	5.35
EHIME	10	95	10.53
TOCHIGI	9	201	4.48
KAGOSHIMA	9	153	5.88
MIYAZAKI	8	115	6.96
MIYAGI	7	193	3.63
NIIGATA	7	114	6.14
GUNMA	7	135	5.19
MIE	7	66	10.61
WAKAYAMA	7	10	70.00
KOCHI	7	26	26.92
IWATE	6	89	6.74
YAMANASHI	6	65	9.23
AOMORI	5	115	4.35
KAGAWA	5	37	13.51
하례	4	102	3.92
YAMAGATA	3	10	30.00
T●YAMA	3	60	5.00
FUKUI	3	31	9.68
KYOT●	3	153	1.96
YAMAGUCHI	3	137	2.19
OITA	3	68	4.41
NAGASAKI	3	7	42.86
NAGANO	2	105	1.90
NARA	2	39	5.13
TOTTORI	2	29	6.90
SAGA	2	8	25.00
KUMAMOTO	2	116	1.72
ISHIKAWA	1	69	1.45
TOKUSHIMA	1	1	100.00
OKINAWA	1	31	3.23
AKITA	0	74	0.00
SHIGA	0	25	0.00
OKAYAMA	0	35	0.00
SHIMANE	0	16	0.00
TOTAL	407	7710	5.28

Some English education companies also provide English courses for early childhood care and education institutions, and offer two types of program. One type of program provides English instruction to all children in each class during the school's regular program hours. The other type of program provides lessons only for children who request them. The language company uses the school's premises for a rental fee. In the case of type 1 programs, each kindergarten pays the language company for lessons; with type 2 programs, each company pays the early childhood care and education institutions for renting the room, and parents who requested the lessons pay for their individual child.

Outsourcing in early childhood care and education institutions to commercial companies is done not only to acquire English education but also to acquire physical education, music, arts and so on. For example, about 60% of preschools hire part-time exercise instructors (Yoshida, et.al., 2006). Early childhood educators tend to consider English lessons and these other areas of learning as special activities and some teachers leave all practice and decision-making to the instructors. These instructors sometimes do not have licenses to teach preschool children and many of them are offering similar education for elementary school children (Yoshida & Kitano, 2006).

ECC, an English education companies, describes its program for English classes for preschoolers on their web site (http://www.eccjr.com/youji/youji_s.html). Lessons are 40 minutes for 4- 5- year-old classes, and 30 minutes for 3-year-old classes. The lessons start by singing English greeting songs. Then children memorize words relevant to the season, for example, *cherry blossom* in April, *carp* in May, and *snail* in June. Then physical expression activities are provided. After that, comes a question and answer time, with picture cards. The class ends with a review of the day's lesson and a goodbye song.

In contrast to private preschools, it is hard for public early childhood care and education institutions to offer English education in their regular curriculum as English education is not written in the national kindergarten curriculum guideline. There are, however, some experimental public kindergartens (Yochien) working on such projects (Ex. Kogose Yochien in Osaka, Harumichi Yochien in Nara, Hiroshima University Laboratory Yochien in Hiroshima. Data from <http://www.mext.go.jp/>

[a_menu/shotou/kenkyu/htm/02_resch/0203_tbl/0301.htm](#)). Most of these experimental projects in Yochien are related to research on elementary school transition programs. The aims of these research projects are to develop systematically-designed curriculum to enhance English abilities. For children in preschool and the lower grades of elementary school, they provide play-based activities and activities using picture books and music material.

There were 264 English private preschools in Japan in January 2007, though there were only 18 in 2002 (Alk, 2007). These English preschools were created for and by native English speakers, but more and more non-English speaking families are sending their children to these English preschools. About 61% of English preschools are in the Kanto district, where is the metropolitan area (Alk, 2007). These preschools are expensive as they cost about between ¥60,000 to ¥130,000 per month (1 US\$ = ¥111.69 on December 8, 2007). According to the Survey of Children's Learning Cost by the MEXT(2007b), the average school expenses for parents to pay for public kindergarten are ¥128,667 per year and for private kindergarten ¥341,273 per year. According to the selected data from Alk (2007), the expenses for the English preschools vary between ¥700,000 to ¥1,500,000 per year.

Even if children spend their early childhood years in an English preschool, most of them later go to Japanese speaking public elementary schools (Alk, 2007). Going to international schools requires more English abilities, and it is expensive, as well. Parents want their children to finish compulsory education and get their qualifications. The lack of continuance of their English studies makes it hard for children to maintain their English ability (Alk, 2007).

There is a conflict on opinion of early English education, some suggest early starts (Cf. Yamada, 2006) and others alert the danger of early education (Cf. Tanaka, 1996). During the discussions of the Central Education Council on English education in early childhood care and education settings, the importance of Japanese language education was revalidated. It was argued that young children's ability to listen and understand and to communicate in Japanese should be improved, and more emphasis on Japanese language has been included as a part of the aim in the 2008 revised editions of the national curriculum guideline for early childhood care and education

institutions (Central Education Council, 2008). English education for young children has not been regulated in the new guideline (MEXT, 2008b).

Early childhood English education in relation to commercialism

Nippon Keidanren (Japan Business Federation) has been making strong suggestions on preeminence of the education market, including collaboration of compulsory education and companies (Nippon Keidanren, 2007). Many newspaper articles have pointed out that the English education market in Japan is now targeting younger generations. The five biggest English education companies, AEON, ECC, GEOS, NOVA (got adjudged bankrupt on November 26th 2007 and was handed over to G-Education), and BERLITZ provide English courses for young children after school. As part of their regular business, a lot of companies not only provide face to face lessons but also traditional correspondence courses, and even correspondence courses via mobile phone. There are also many English learning materials, products and educational toys (the Yomiuri, 2005, Feb. 1st). YAMAHA, one of the most famous companies traditionally in the business of providing musical instruments and music education, has also started teaching English.

With the help of the analysis of data taken from the home pages of the six companies (see Table 3), I am able to present a broad overview of after-school English lessons for preschoolers.

Table 3. *Home Page addresses of companies*

Name of the company	Home page address
AEON	http://www.aeonet.co.jp/kids/index.html
ECC	http://www.eccjr.co.jp/
GEOS	http://www.geos.co.jp/l_kids/index_3.html#01
NOVA	http://www.nova.ne.jp/kids/index.html
BERLITZ	http://www.berlitz.co.jp/kids/kids.html
YAMAHA	http://www.yamaha.co.jp/school/

Three out of the six companies provide courses starting from one year of age; others start courses at one year and six months, at two years, and at four years. The length of the classes varies from 30 to 60 minutes. Fees are very high. For example, the monthly fee of a one-lesson-a-week course ranges from ¥5,000 to ¥25,000 (1 US\$=¥111.69 on December 8, 2007). Some companies also require a starting admission fee of ¥5,250 to ¥21,000, and all companies make parents pay for the materials used in the class, the cost of which ranges from ¥840 to ¥19,000. Some companies have a certification system that requires passing a test that also costs about ¥2,100 to ¥3,150. Class sizes are very small, with all six companies providing classes of less than 10 children. For children younger than two year of age, class enrollments are limited to 3 to 4 children and each child's parent. In addition to the cost, provide English learning classes require adults, such as a parent, to come and sometimes even attend the classes with their children. Given this requirement, private, after-school classes are hard for families with two working parents to access.

The correspondence study courses are emerging, and brisk sales for English learning materials also have been reported. In general, there are a lot of English picture books, CDs, DVDs and video tapes, and beside these, more and more learning kits are produced. There are 93 English education materials listed in "English Catalog for Children, 2008" (Alk, 2007). Prices of English education material sets vary from about ¥3,000 to ¥189,000. According to the data from Yano Research Institute (2007), preschoolers English education material set market (only for combined learning kits) amounted to 34 billion yen, and after-school English courses for children was 97.1 billion market, in 2006. Young children's English education market is wider as there are also toys, books, videos, DVDs, educational soft wares, e-learning services, and so on. It has been said that English education for children is a 3 trillion yen market (Ex. <http://allabout.co.jp/children/kidsenglish/closeup/ CU20020416R/>).

Most of the after-school English education courses provide play and activity based lessons, although some provide special courses designed to prepare children for exams, including writing and reading. The United Nations Association's Junior Test of English, the Cambridge ESOL Young Learners Test, and some other tests provided by Japanese associations. Those associations are providing English education and

promoting it. Some of them provide English test from a very early age. Though there is an age limit of seven for the Cambridge ESOL Young Learners Test, there is no age limit for the United Nations Association's Junior Test of English. According to the home page of the Society for Testing English Proficiency, 1,235 of 4 year-olds, 3,366 of 5-year-olds and 7,465 of 6 year-olds took the exam provided by them in 2006 (http://www.eiken.or.jp/jr_step/index_jyuku_joukyou.html). Children can take exam provided by the Association of Children's English Testing by three year of age. The age group of children who took grade-level 6 English Language Proficiency test of the Japan Association for the Promotion of English for Children was 4-7 and 6-9 for grade-level 5 (http://www.japen.jp/hp/kentei/test_level.htm).

English education materials and private English learning classes cost a lot. Private English after-school classes require adults to come and sometimes even to attend the classes with their children and it makes hard to access for families with two working parents. In many countries, early childhood care and education is shifting from the private to the public domain, however, in Japan, the privatization of the early childhood care and education seems more likely to happen (Kitano, 2006).

Conclusion

This paper has provided information on the policy, practice and commercialism in relation to English education for young children in Japan. The results show that English lessons are offered more widely at private after-school institutions and private preschool settings than at public, and English education market is spreading. The arguments for enhancing universal access for English education for young children are bogged down in debates and the government is now focused on the importance of enhancing the ability and sensitivity to the child's own language, to Japanese. However, the private English education industry is growing. A lot of private, out of school lessons and educational materials are targeting very young children.

A main concern is whether the current condition of access to English education will widen the gap between families. Most private early-education institutions are

expensive and require a parent's attendance for the lessons. Another concern is whether the education content and the teachers' qualification lead to developmental appropriateness in the instruction for young children. Exams are given to the young children and private lessons are provided to prepare for exams.

The quality and quantity of English education for young children should be considered together with the need for well-trained teachers. From private interviews with my university students who have studied English from preschool or early elementary school age at private after-school institutions, I found that none of them felt that they were fluent in speaking in English. There are some case studies examining the effect of full-immersion programs in the English preschool in both English and Japanese comprehension. The Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children appealed the proposals for introducing English education into elementary schools in 2006. They also emphasized the importance of English education for preschoolers on developmental grounds. There have also been some research papers about the limitations of English education for young children because of the lack of the opportunities for them to listen and speak English in daily life circumstances. Even many of children that spend their younger years at English preschools do not go to English speaking elementary schools but enter Japanese elementary schools, which raises the question of what value there is in an early start.

Ten years passed since English education was introduced in elementary schools, in Japan. However, English ability of Japanese is not seems to be rising, for example, recent Japanese average score of the test of English as a foreign language was the worst or the second worst in Asia (ETS, 2008). Ironically, although the gap of opportunities to learn English from early years is widening between families, results in English education have not shown this gap, so far. More practical research and policy studies are needed in to provide equal educational opportunities for young children, to prepare well-trained teachers in English, and to prepare methodologically appropriate English education practices for young children. The kind of English education that is needed is developmentally and culturally appropriate practice for young children, and one that ensures their best interests.

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