

Elementary School English Now

—Interviews with ALTs—

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This paper is a report on interviews with seven ALTs (assistant language teachers) who are working at local elementary schools in Japan. As the new Course of Study was announced in March 2008, most elementary schools in Japan implemented the Foreign Language Activities class in April 2009, two years ahead of the official start of the new curriculum. The aim of these interviews was to gain insight into the current state of elementary school English language education. Several positive aspects of the introduction of English language into elementary school were highlighted in the interviews, with some challenges to overcome.

Key words: Foreign Language Activities, positive attitudes toward communication, Elementary school ALTs

1. Introduction

This paper is a report on interviewsⁱ with seven elementary school ALTs (hereafter, EALTs) who are working in the writer's prefecture. EALTsⁱⁱ are hired via different programmes and organizations by different municipalities. Five of the EALTs interviewed here are hired by a city, and thus are called City EALTs. The other two EALTs are Prefectural EALTs and are hired via the JET programme. They teach at about twelve elementary schools, visiting each for a day every other week.

The aim of these interviews was to gain insight into elementary school English language education, with a view to helping Japanese elementary school teachers to work better with EALTs. The paper might also provide other English language teachers with talking points on how English language education in junior and senior high schools could be further improved.

2. Background of the study

The new Course of Study was publicly announced

in March 2008. It stipulates that Foreign Language Activities be implemented in the 5th and 6th grades at elementary schools and that 35 class hours should be allocated in each grade from 2011. The overall objectives of Foreign Language Activities are stated as follows:

To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages. (MEXT, 2009a)

Since the Course of Study states that “in principle English should be selected for foreign language activities,” English language has finally been made into a part of official school coursesⁱⁱⁱ after many years of debate over the pros and cons of teaching English at elementary schools.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (hereafter, the MEXT) started to designate elementary schools as pilot schools to research and develop English conversation activities in 1992. In

the writer's area, Minato Elementary School (Fukui, Fukui Prefecture) was designated as a pilot school under a three-year scheme in 1996, when every Prefecture finally had one pilot school for this project. Since then this school has continued its English language activities, focusing particularly on communication activities. In 2007, the MEXT started to appoint one key school in every 40 elementary schools that could be made a model school in local areas. They will establish methodologies of how to teach international understanding and English language activity classes, and to pursue practical ways to implement their plan, including the effective use of ALTs and local personnel.

Preparations for the implementation of the Foreign Language Activities has been going on for over a decade. However, uncertainties still surround methodologies and pedagogy with the result that teachers at many elementary schools are still perplexed as to what and how to teach. According to the survey carried out in 2009 by Obunsha Company, 52.5 % of the responding elementary school teachers in charge of English language activities express anxiety about the introduction of the course as a mandatory part of elementary school education.

The MEXT allowed schools to start this programme this year. According to MEXT (2009b), in 2009, 97.8% of elementary schools in Japan are planning to implement the Foreign Language Activities in the 5th and 6th grades, 25.3% of them giving 11 to 20 class hours and 53.8% of them 35 class hours a year. On average, 28.2 class hours a year are given to each grade. When we are to think about the future English language education in Japan, we need a better understanding about what is going on in elementary schools, now that the Foreign Language Activities, where “English should be selected,” have substantially started.

3. The interviews

This section presents a summary of interviews with seven EALTs. The questions asked are:

- (1) *What are the good points and the challenges of teaching elementary school students?*
- (2) *If you have taught at JHS and/or SHS, too, do you see any big differences between teaching there and teaching in elementary schools, in terms of students, class activities, relationships with other teachers, and other work involved?*
- (3) *What do you think about the introduction of the English subject into elementary school curriculum?*
- (4) *Do you have any messages that you'd like to communicate to JTEs^{iv} and other teachers you are working with?*

First, in Sections 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, the interviews of three EALTs will be reproduced as they narrated, though in shortened forms leaving their key points. Then, in Section 3.4, the key points of the interviews with the rest of the interviewees will be shown in tables.

3.1 Mr. A, with MA in English Language Teaching and eight years' experience of teaching English language in Japan (three years in JHS, two years in a private school, and three years in elementary schools)^v

- (1) *What are the good points and the challenges of teaching elementary school students?*

(Good points)

I think it's important because research seems to indicate that the earlier we start, the better it is for the students, provided that the education continues. When they are younger, certainly it's easier to raise intrinsic motivation. It's unknown to them what English is, what another language is, so it is new, it is exciting. As you get older, you're more likely to question, “Why do I need this?” As a teacher, you get more positive feedback from children. Children certainly

seem to enjoy English class very much. For example, students come up to you and say, “How do you say this in English?” Not only as to English itself, but general curiosity, “How is school lunch back in your country?” So there's child-like curiosity. In junior high school, students do not volunteer and ask. I think they are embarrassed, or just they're afraid to make mistakes.

Just positive attitudes out there in elementary schools. It's something new every day because, especially 5th and 6th grade students, they are always eager to tell you about themselves. The challenge is turning the eagerness to communicate into the eagerness to communicate in English while in English class. Outside of class, we are not so strict when speaking to the students. While in English class, as much as possible, we try and create an English-speaking environment. During lunch time, we often eat lunch with some of the classes, sometimes homeroom teachers say, “Let's ask sensei some questions.” If I know there're questions they have learned in class, or should know, for example, “What animal do you like?” If somebody asks in Japanese, I would ask if there's anybody who could say that in English. But if it gets more difficult, serious, or more complex, then, talking in Japanese is fine.

Yes, teacher input is important. Showering with English, and telling them that you don't have to understand everything. “What key words do you understand?” So in class, we try to explain the concept of how we are going to do an activity completely in English, and again, lots of repetition, gestures. If you can use gestures, for example pointing to a clock, you don't need to say it in Japanese. Usually one of the students picks up, and they'll say in Japanese, and other students who didn't understand will understand.

(Challenges)

Nowadays, because the new curriculum has been introduced for the 5th and 6th grades, or will be nationally introduced in 2011, many elementary school stu-

dents go to after-school English classes. As a result, there's been a gap between students who are not receiving any other English education and those who are. So the challenge is presenting a material that engages the higher level students, but doesn't completely pass over the lower level students. One of the ways to cope with this challenge is to make a lot of group work, so you get students with different levels in groups, so stronger students will help the lower level students.

Personally I'd like to have some evaluation, so that I see how the programme is going. I don't advocate students be graded. But I'd like to see, for example, by the end of the 6th grade, I want to see the students are able to introduce themselves, express likes and dislikes, and be able to ask directions. Right now, we have no data to say whether what we are doing is working. So we have no starting point, and the end point seems to be, at least up to now, poor performance on, for example, TOEIC test, TOEFL test, and STEP test, so in Japan, I think we need to have a better idea what we're starting with, rather than looking at the end, and saying, “Oh, they can't do well on this test.” We need to get off the right start, and possibly the end of the goal.

As to homeroom teachers teaching English, that's something that needs a few years to remedy. It's not fair to expect a teacher that doesn't have any English ability automatically to be able to teach. Certainly we are working with elementary school teachers on how to use easy classroom English, effective use of software that comes with the new textbooks. This is the first year to use the new textbooks. There are some hiccups, technical and with software, but I think we're moving toward the right direction. The negative is that we do visit so many different schools that it's hard to be helpful, and it's sometimes hard for teachers to approach us, like “Ah, he's here only once a week. I don't know him that well, so I don't really want to ask questions.” So we have already given

messages to elementary school teachers that either in English or in Japanese, please ask us. We want to help. I mean, part of our job is also to help.

(2) If you have taught at JHS and/or SHS, too, do you see any big differences between teaching there and teaching in elementary schools, in terms of students, class activities, relationships with other teachers, and other work involved?

A positive thing about team-teaching at elementary school is that now it's almost exclusively with 5th and 6th grades, we tend to see the same class more often. It allows us a better relationship, especially with the students.

Activities are somewhat similar, like for example, a gap activity. The activity stays the same, but it's just the language level. So we would expect much more production out of junior high school students because they are older. The textbooks of the 5th and 6th grades have now some games built in as well as the teaching guides that recommend activities. It's trying to get the students produce something, produce English that can be understood. Doesn't have to be grammatically correct, can be understood. Again, expectations for junior high and high school students are a little bit more. We want a complete sentence. Because it is in an EFL^{vi} environment, it is more of providing a comfortable environment to speak English, not that being comfortable to speak English. That is, it's OK to be nervous. It's OK to make a mistake. That's true of any learner. Especially language.

Because we move from school to school, we do not see the same teacher each time, so it's difficult to build a closer teacher-to-teacher relationship. Some teachers just prefer to be kind of at the back, not beside. Other teachers want to have a team-teaching role. So it's an adjustment on both sides. I have not explicitly talked with teachers what kind of team we want to make, but it's just kind of naturally happen. I usually tell teachers, "You have to teach on your own, so you

might just as well participate," but it's something that should be discussed outside the classroom. I'm comfortable teaching just by myself in front of the classroom. And I'm comfortable teaching with somebody. So it's a matter of communication. That's the No. 1 thing, both of us knowing what both sides want to do and being on the same page. With JHS teachers, it was mostly team-teaching because English is there. Even among JTEs, there was difference in level. But in general, JTEs were much easier to get the team-teaching relationship formed. With the elementary school teachers, we are not in their staff room every day, so it's taking a little bit longer time to form that relationships. When it's time to present a main activity, or when it's time to explain in Japanese, it's quite clearly split.

However, we usually plan lessons together. Typical meeting will last maybe fifteen minutes. There is a teaching manual that goes along with both textbooks. And at least on my part, we're stuck to that because it is what teachers can easily reference. If there is a change, or if I think there is an idea that would work well, I present that idea to the teacher, too. The teaching manual, although it gives us a challenge because it's all in Japanese, gives the homeroom teacher a reference point. So far, I'm satisfied with the teaching manual, although we have sometimes augmented it, according to our individual teaching styles, and to accommodate to activities that we know, because at a lot of schools, we are not starting from zero. Because this city has had quite an aggressive programme to teach English for some time, the 5th and 6th graders now, probably have been getting English lessons since they were in the 1st grade. So where the textbooks get a bit weak or unclear, we are not afraid to talk to the teacher and say, "Look. We've done this game before. They know this game. Let's just take the language from this unit, and apply this game." That way saves us time. Now that MEXT has published the textbooks, and many publishers have been publishing supple-

mentary materials, I think the burden is actually less now. Also, our offices are already compiling other materials. We already have a DVD that will supplement one of the units. The textbooks, the new curriculum, are good, but it's not perfect.

As for whom to write teaching plans, as far as creating and reading lesson plans, it's much easier if Japanese teachers write. If we're to create, it will all be in English. It may be hard in the beginning, but in the long run, it would be more beneficial because Japanese teachers get some English practice, and for the ALTs coming in in the future, it will be good if they are written in English because we'll be replaced in three or four years.

(3) What do you think about the introduction of the English subject into elementary school curriculum?

I think it's a positive thing. Although English might be a medium, I think there're a lot of social skills that go along with it. We might be different, but we're not necessarily wrong, I mean, like other countries, other societies' ways of doing things, they might be different, but they're not wrong. We should also focus more on commonalities, what we have in common, rather than what separates us, I think I saw some missteps in some of the lessons in the past: "Oh, this is how they do it. This is how we do it. Look how different it is." I don't think that's the right message to send. I think we should look at it like: "Yeah, although we do it differently, this is why we do it so. This is why this country does it this way." There's always a reason.

The world now is global. The days of being monolingual are slowly going to be the things of the past. So it's more common now that people are bilingual than monolingual, so students might as well have fun, and get used to it. It doesn't have to be English, but it just opens up many doors as well as just a benefit to overall way of learning. It gives you another skill. Another tool to learn in general. It gives you access to much more information. And probably it makes you more

rounded person. So to the people who would say "I don't need English," well, you will.

(4) If you have any messages that you'd like to communicate to JTEs and other teachers you're working with, please make this interview an opportunity to communicate your messages to them.

Don't be afraid to ask us questions. We are resources here to help you with English education, so if you are truly interested, or if you just want to talk with somebody, please talk to us because we have various backgrounds in our office, and it's our pleasure to help. The best thing we could give elementary school teachers is, "Use us." Most of us in our office have definitely intermediate Japanese, so that teachers don't have to be apprehensive approaching us outside the classroom for the next lesson. "OK, I have to do this lesson next week. You're not here. What ideas do you have?" Up until now, not so many teachers have taken advantage of us. We are people, obviously, but we are resources. All of us have some educational background and at minimum, three years of teaching experience. One of the positive things is that we get many experiences in different schools. For example, teachers may ask, "Only my class does this?" or "Is it only this school that has this kind of problem?" Individually, we get to see 13 different schools. So, in regard to behaviour problems, we might have a better idea about what's normal. At least in English classroom, we might have a better idea about what's normal. So if teachers are experiencing negative attitudes, "I don't like English," that teacher is able to come to us and say, "Is this what I did? They don't do this," or they might not be so responsive. We might be able to give some advice on how to change the lesson or how to move to a better direction.

3.2 Mr. B, in his fourth year of teaching English in Japan (three years in a JHS visiting several elementary schools, and three months in elemen-

tary schools)

(1) *What are the good points and the challenges of teaching elementary school students?*

(Good points)

I really enjoy teaching elementary school students. When I was based in a JHS, I had nine to ten elementary schools to visit. But I only went once a semester, so every year 3 times in each school, so not so much. There was a big gap between the visits, so I didn't get to know the students so well. But with this new job, I get to know the students better and know the teachers better.

In elementary school they rarely worry about mistakes. They are happy to try. They are never nervous, so they just speak, speak, speak. Some teachers give their students a lot of confidence, and some students are a bit nervous about English as well, but if this teacher is confident with the students, the children will try anything. With the 1st graders and the 2nd graders, we had a shopping game the other day. It was quite a long conversation, but because they are not nervous, usually they can do it.

Actually, 5th and 6th graders, now they have a textbook, and they seem to be a little bit more confident. Or maybe because I go regularly, and because they have English every week, that helps. I don't know about textbooks, if that helps, but definitely I see them regularly, they feel they can try. Also, in JHS, if they don't study in the 1st year, it's very difficult in the 2nd year. If they don't study in the 2nd year, the 3rd year English is very difficult. But in elementary school, the 5th and the 6th grades have separate topics, like "Do you have ~" "Can you~". So even if one week it's a bit too difficult, still next week, it doesn't get more difficult. It's just a different topic. Yes, students sometimes find it difficult, but next week they can feel more comfortable. So they get confidence. They say, "Oh, I can't do well this week, but next week I can."

I think, in Japan particularly, it's very important for

the students to meet people from other countries. Especially the 1st and 2nd graders, it's often I am the first person they have spoken to. "Wow, a foreign person comes to my school." Sometimes on TV they create an image of a foreign person, so the students have an idea, but it's very important that when they meet somebody, they realize that not all people are the same. Especially at a young age, if they enjoy speaking and talking to a foreign person, maybe they will be more positive when they are older. I don't know how much students feel Japanese, or do they feel human, but I think that the more they meet foreign teachers, I think that's a good thing.

I enjoy telling them about my country. If I tell them about simple things like food, things that are different from Japan, students find interesting. Because they maybe think everybody eats rice every day, and I say, "No, no, I eat rice every month one time or two times." Then they say, "Hohl!" Just simple things about life in different countries are very, very important.

(Challenges)

When I started this job, I was a little bit nervous because in the two-week schedule, I go to many schools, and I worried, "Can I get to know the teachers? Can I get to know the students?" But so far, only about two months, so far is very good. I'm very happy.

Maybe at the 5th grade, they start to be more like JHS students. Fifth grade and 6th grade, sometimes they say "Oh, I can't do it." Maybe 5th graders, they are still confident, but at the end of 5th grade and sometimes 6th, but it's different in different schools. The schools I visit are in the countryside, they don't care, they're all confident. At other schools, they are more self-conscious. The countryside students are always confident, because they are often smaller classes. My smallest class is eight students. But in the cities, some schools are fantastic. Students are confident. So it's not so simple.

It's difficult sometimes if students have some spe-

cial educational needs. Before, they didn't use to tell me. And in the class, if I don't know the children's situation, I would say, "Ah, please sit down! Shhh!" But recently, I've asked teachers, "Please tell me." But that was very difficult to start with. Not knowing the students so well, and how to, if there're any problems.

(2) If you have taught at JHS and/or SHS, too, do you see any big differences between teaching there and teaching in elementary schools, in terms of students, class activities, relationships with other teachers, and other work involved?

I think, in my role in a classroom in elementary school, I am more of a lead-teacher. In JHS, I was always, nnn, usually, an assistant teacher. So the JTE would lead the lesson, and I would help do activities or workshops, but the teacher was always the main teacher, whereas in elementary school, I'm often the main teacher. And the homeroom teacher helps me like an assistant. Because I've taught three years now, I enjoy that challenge, new challenge. But for a new teacher, that would be quite difficult. My job in a classroom is a little bit different. Because we go to half their lessons, one week they have an ALT, and one week they don't. The homeroom teacher can do some activities one week, and we do one week. If ALTs go every week, the balance would have to be a little better. Two main teachers would be perfect. But if homeroom teacher leads one week, and ALT leads next week, I think it's good for the children. Personally I enjoy being the main teacher because it's nice to lead the lesson, and a good challenge for me.

Activities. The difference is, at elementary schools, they are more communicative. In my junior high school I always had six different teachers, for one teacher, speaking was very important, for some teachers, reading and writing were much more important. But in elementary school, the focus is definitely on speaking, so I really enjoy that. At junior high school, because the test is just listening, reading and writing,

that's the most important for the students, of course. But some students learn and remember English by speaking. So, for the students who learn by speaking, sometimes junior high school is a bit tough. But in elementary school, with lots of speaking, some of the students can remember very easily.

(3) What do you think about the introduction of the English subject into elementary school curriculum?

I think it's good to do speaking and just focus on enjoying English, no test, and yeah, like no pressure on the students, just enjoying English. I think that's fantastic. But I think if the 1st grade students started on the 5th grade textbook, they could do everything, and the 2nd grade everything with the 6th grade textbook. And then, perhaps by the end of 6th grade, they could finish junior high school textbook. Really. Especially, when they are younger, they remember everything. I'm so jealous. Also, if you teach them without pressure, without tests, you can teach them the joy of learning another language without pressure. Because now I study Japanese, and I don't have to do any tests, I don't have to study, but I enjoy study. So the best is that the students want to study, just because it's enjoyable to learn about another culture or... I think that's my dream... I think no tests is a big part of that. As soon as you have tests, then at elementary school, students feel, "Oh, I have to study." I think, for English, there shouldn't be any pressure, or just enjoy speaking another language. If you have too many tests, there's no joy of learning.

(4) Do you have any messages that you'd like to communicate to JTEs and other teachers you are working with?

To elementary school teachers, I think the most important thing is confidence in the English that they know. Because many teachers say, "Ah, I don't know English. I haven't spoken English for many years since I left university years ago." But teachers always know more English, almost always, than their stu-

dents. Some of my best teachers are teachers that are very low level but want to enjoy speaking English with the students, and if they make a mistake, they say, “Ah, I made a mistake.” I think the most important thing is be confident in your English, and don't worry about making mistakes. It's good to show the students that you can try. I can speak because I am English, so the students, if they see me speaking, they say, “O, you're foreign. You speak English.” If they see their teacher speak English, it's a good role model for the students. So, always try to be confident.

3.3 Mr. C, in his eighth year of teaching English in Japan (three years in a JHS, and four years in elementary schools)

(1) What are the good points and the challenges of teaching elementary school students?

(Good points)

I think there are a lot of benefits. For example, it will help develop something called “executive function,” a kind of a process in the brain that helps people schedule tasks, and think about things critically. Learning a foreign language gives students a lot of opportunities to use different parts of their brains, and also to think about things from different perspectives.

Also, there has been a lot of discussion about critical period for language. Maybe, even the 5th grade and the 6th grade is even a bit late, but nobody would dispute that learning a foreign language is easier when you're younger than when you're older.

I feel like students at elementary school are more energetic, they take more risks, they just enjoy, they are more interested in the things that are interesting and different. And if we can start a foreign language at that stage, the students can have good experiences with it, and use those good experiences later on to help them overcome difficulties of learning a foreign language. If you don't have any good experiences, when you have only maybe neutral or negative experiences, it's natural to want to stop that, or not devote

much time to it. Yeah, I really think that those communication experiences that students have in elementary school can be helpful for them to start to love a foreign language in JHS. Bringing a kind of positive experience to a foreign language where you need to stand out, you need to make mistakes, is easier in elementary school than in JHS.

At an elementary school, we did a very good lesson. They were going on a school trip soon. One of their jobs was to meet a foreigner in Nara, Osaka, or Kyoto, and kind of interview them. So they thought of different kinds of questions to ask, things like “Is this the first time to Kyoto?” “What Japanese food do you like?” “Do you know oroshisoba?” “Do you like sumo?” Lots of different, pretty interesting questions. And they had to do this in a group. Those kinds of group activities can be very positive for the students. Learning how to cooperate, and to work as a group. That way can improve the students' relationship. Students can become friends. In that way, English conversation could be good for helping students to relate to each other regardless of gender, which I think is really, really good. Also, I think students rarely ask each other, “How are you?” in Japanese that much. Things like that. I think students have deep relationship to each other, but you know, I wonder how much they talk about things like that.

Students in general feel pretty positive about foreigners and foreign things. But you know every now and then, you get students who are shy or scared. And students are usually scared about unknown things. That's very natural. Through language, those unknown things students were scared of become known, and become less scary. I think that's also a very positive thing.

(Challenges)

One of the most difficult things right now is that that system is still very new. We are in a transitional period. So it feels to me that I feel I'm doing something for the first time again, whereas before, I had kind of

everything organized and set. This, in a way, is for me a good opportunity to grow more. I think sometimes things in the textbooks are too easy for the students, and there are a lot of activities which I have done before. There are some topics, although not too many. There are a few topics we haven't dealt with before. Probably the biggest one is alphabet. Before this year, we didn't really teach alphabet. We now teach it at the very beginning of the 6th grade textbook.

I think there are some areas that the textbooks can be improved. Maybe, in general, a little bit more time should be spent on interview-style activities, but I don't think there're so many in the textbook. One of the weaknesses is that some of the units have a final goal that actually isn't that interesting. The other part of communication may be listening practice and with *eigo noto* now, they have more listening activities. Those are proving to be pretty good for the students as well. I find that a lot of the students who may not respond in English are still able to listen and understand in English. So having more listening activities, especially those students get to be a part of the class, and it also gives students a sense of accomplishment.

Also difficult is the varied levels of teachers. Some teachers take very active approach to English. They are very involved in their class. Some teachers don't take as active an approach. Normally, teachers who don't feel that strongly with English tend to shy away from English class.

I would say, probably about 60 to 70 %, I'm kind of the main teacher leading the class, and the homeroom teacher is supporting me. And the other 30 % is the opposite, where the homeroom teacher has a strong idea about how the teacher wants to teach the class, and is leading effectively. I'm there to support them. It is difficult to adjust, especially for me because I have a bad memory. It's hard for me to remember each teacher's style, and the character of each class, which I think are both important for planning a good lesson. The main way to overcome this problem is communi-

cation. I try and many teachers are good about speaking with me, either before class or after class, and at meetings. Eventually, you start to remember different teacher styles. It gets easier with time, but that's one of our biggest challenges. Adjusting for each different class, because students are different, and if the teacher has a different style. That's one of the hard part of the job.

(2) If you have taught at JHS and/or SHS, too, do you see any big differences between teaching there and teaching in elementary schools, in terms of students, class activities, relationships with other teachers, and other work involved?

Yes, there are lots of differences. Maybe the biggest differences are we are not at those schools every day. We visit each school once in every two weeks. And from that difference, there are a lot of differences.

We are less involved in day-to-day activities at school. When I was at a junior high school, I would come in the morning meeting. You know, I would do cleaning time, I stay with the kids after school, I would help with tests and homework, things like that. I was one of the staff. With this job, because we are at different schools every day, and because we come back in the afternoons for meetings, none of that happens. And so, I think it's natural for us to be more outside the school community than when we were working at a junior high school. So, that will also change your relationship with the teachers. I don't think I have deep relationships with the teachers I work with. I made good relationships with those great teachers at junior high schools, and I do miss not having that now. You get to know the teachers you work with at elementary schools somewhat, but not the same degree.

The same is true with the students. We see the students more now, but we don't see them as much as we could. If we're more familiar with the students, we could get better relationship with them, and you

know, they would trust us a bit more, maybe try harder in some cases. So, that could be very good, too, but unfortunately, there aren't enough teachers right now to be able to do fewer schools. So, I guess that's the biggest difference.

The other difference, I think, is maybe just the way English is taught. You know, English in JHS is an actual subject. That's three times a week. There're grades, quizzes, tests, homework, and things like that. They have a goal of making students proficient in English by learning grammar and vocabulary, something like that, so it's more serious than it is in elementary school. We don't have test or homework or things like that. According to the MEXT, it's more about developing students' attitude toward English, improving that through interesting and engaging activities. So the focus is different, too. I think that changes how we teach a lot. We're not so serious about pronunciation, or correcting mistakes, although I encourage good pronunciation, and I try and correct mistakes where I think it's appropriate. But it's much more about trying to get students to use as much English as they can in a communicative way. Maybe in terms of being effective, I think there will probably be a place for homework and tests. Personally, I think, at least homework.

JHS is a very awkward time, anyway, students are learning and also trying to be more adult, I think, in JHS. I think one of the things that come out of that is a fear of standing out, and a fear of making mistakes. I think students have a very difficult time overcoming these two things. I think probably other issues would be that although I think JHS teachers are trying their best, English is taught largely to pass a test. I think that often times at JHSs, a subject is introduced, is tested, and unfortunately, often times, it will be forgotten. With language, that's a common problem. So, that might be part of it as well. But essentially, students are basically in an adolescence phase of life, where, you know, there are different kinds of pressures, stresses, and students don't want to stick out, and

they don't want to make mistakes, and they may not just find something that interests them about English.

(3) What do you think about the introduction of the English subject into elementary school curriculum?

I think it's good because for a lot of schools, their big complaint before this year was that they didn't have training about how to create good classes. So some schools were lost as to what to do. Pilot schools were good ones, so teachers could come and see what they were doing. “Shogakko Jissen Tebiki” is a collection of teaching plans and sample curriculum that all schools could use. Many schools would take lessons from that and work with us. But a lot of schools, I think, they still felt that they didn't have a great direction about their English programme. So, one of the things the introduction of the curriculum does is it gives everyone a standard plan to follow. Having a basic programme, a basic plan, gives teachers who don't have strong background in English a way to teach English, and the idea of what kind of things should be done.

It gives more standardization to English education. Before now, normally, people would ask “What shall we do?” “What shall we teach?” Every school is kind of different. So you had to think about what to teach. So there was a lot of freedom. But with that freedom comes a lot of choices that we had to make. So, now, schools may have lost some of the freedom to pursue English this way or that way, but the trade-off is that some of the people are saying, “These are the things we should be studying” and people can develop interesting activities and resources for those activities on national scale. So, I think we will see more textbooks and more guidebooks, more materials and resources be developed that teachers can use. So, that direction, standardization, I think, is a really big plus.

Also, having English classes regularly is, I think, really, really critical. So having that curriculum encourages that as well.

And lastly, having a curriculum where JHS teachers know what their students have learned should make it smoother to bridge the gap between elementary school and JHS. If JHS teachers know what their students have studied, they can make their classes more interesting to the students. So there are a lot of good points to that.

The only downside is, you know, in our city, we lost the ability to the younger grades. Formerly, we used to teach 3rd and 4th, sometimes 2nd and 1st grades as well. I kind of miss that. English is not only the priority, I understand that. I think it would be great to visit younger grades more for the purposes of good PR, of giving students positive experiences. Any exposure to different kind of people and different kind of culture, I think, is a good experience. In terms of regular English class, I guess it's possible, if the desire is there, to start from maybe 3rd and 4th grade.

Also less freedom. At some schools, where they already have exceptional curriculums in place and some very good ideas about how they want to teach English, I think they will probably, I don't know for sure but, be forced to use the national curriculum. I think that's kind of a shame. But I think it's a worthy trade-off for most of the schools.

If we can continue to implement this programme, maybe we can get those students on the right track earlier. Maybe attitudes toward English will be more positive, and get them some basic experience working with an ALT, alphabets, with simple vocabulary sets, like fruits, countries, like that. If we can do that, then, I think the students will be able to do more in JHS. So, I would say, for the moment, at JHS, I would say, the first two or three months, the JHS textbooks are intellectually low for intermediate to advanced students, but probably about the right area for the beginners. But if the teachers can depend on students' having learned English in their 5th and 6th grades, they can probably start to do more in JHS. Maybe a little bit sooner. For example, if you had two extra months,

you could choose to either accelerate the whole programme, or to do what you already know more in detail. So, if they don't understand the basic concepts like present tense verbs, base vocabulary, alphabet recognition, I think this will give JHS teachers more freedom to decide what the students would be able to learn.

(4) Do you have any messages that you'd like to communicate to JTEs and other teachers you are working with?

I hope JHS and SHS teachers are doing similar kinds of lessons that we do that are interesting to the students and give them opportunities to use English they know, apply English they are learning. Maybe if they can, try and give students a variety of activities. If we have done a good job, then, I think the more they can model the beginning of their classes to what we've been doing, the easier for the students to make transition. So, if they are familiar with "Eigo Noto," try and learn what "Eigo Noto" has, what kinds of activities they know, and use that knowledge to make transition to JHS English easier for them.

For elementary school teachers, for the teachers who don't have English background, try not let it stop you from learning how to teach English. I realize what's been asked of them is very difficult. But this is the way things are going to go. No one would say you have to become a perfect English teacher overnight. And this is a process for us, teachers, as much as for the students learning English for the first time. So, for the teachers who are nervous about English, don't feel that way. They have a lot of English ability.

For all teachers, try and evaluate the class afterwards to see how the students responded. Even though there's a curriculum, be aware that we can make changes for each class or each grade to make the curriculum better for the students. So, as you're doing lessons, think about how you'd like to improve them in the future.

To all the elementary school teachers, when work-

ing with an ALT, try and communicate as much as possible. Try and be honest with the EALT. Because from the communication and honesty, we can make a better class, we can understand each other better. The understanding, honesty and trust, is a key part of team-teaching. So, if we did a class, and the other teacher didn't think it was a good activity, I would like to hear that. And if the teacher has a reservation or problem, maybe they don't really understand the grammar point, for example, I want them to ask me, so we could fix that. If during the class, we're supposed to do next activity, but the teacher didn't think the students were ready, or what we're doing was too easy, I want to know during the class, so that we can adjust. We may have disagreement in the short term, but we can be professional, and respect each other. And I think that will lead to a better working relationship ultimately. I know it's exactly not the Japanese thing to do. Often times teachers want to be reserved, don't want to cause problems, but I really do think there's value in speaking honestly about things. I'd like to do the same thing myself. Every time we have

a conversation, there's always room for improvement. Being open and willing to communicate, that I think is really, really helpful.

3.4 Interviews with the other 4 EALTs

In this section, we will see the key points presented by the rest of the interviewees in tables. The points mentioned by the interviewees are indicated by ○ in the boxes of the tables. The key words are highlighted in bold letters.

- Mr. D, in his second year of teaching English in Japan (one year at JHS, a few months at elementary schools)
- Ms E, in her seventh year of teaching English in Japan (two and half years in JHS visiting four elementary schools as well, four years in elementary schools)
- Ms F, with MA in philology and several years teaching English in Japan (two years at a SHS, private schools, a JHS, two years in elementary schools)
- Mr. G, nine years teaching English to different age groups in Japan

(1) What are the good points and the challenges of teaching elementary school students?

Good points

	Mr. D	Ms E	Ms F	Mr. G
Elementary school students are more curious than older students.	○	○		
Elementary school students are more flexible than older students.	○			
Elementary school students have more positive attitude toward English.	○	○	○	○
Elementary school students have better listening ability , and are good at producing good pronunciation .			○	
Elementary school students are enjoying having communication in English.	○	○		○
Elementary school students have less anxiety compared to older students.	○		○	
Elementary school students are young , so good for learning a language.	○			
Elementary school students are under less pressure because there is no test.	○	○		
Elementary school teachers are more motivated in creating fun classes .		○		
More games are used in elementary school classes.			○	
Elementary school English classes can be creative .				○

Challenges

	Mr. D	Ms E	Ms F	Mr. G
Elementary school students can be talkative in Japanese .	○			
Elementary school students have different learning styles .		○		
Elementary school Ss have shorter attention span compared to older Ss.			○	○

Some elementary school students are not used to meeting foreigners .			○	
In elementary schools, it is better if EALTs can speak in Japanese to a certain degree.	○	○		
Elementary school is not a proper learning environment with accountability .				○
Japanese homeroom teachers/JETs have different teaching styles .		○		

(2) If you have taught at JHS and/or SHS, too, do you see any big differences between teaching there and teaching in elementary schools, in terms of students, class activities, relationships with other teachers, and other work involved?

	Mr. D	Ms E	Ms F	Mr. G
Skill focus is different. In elementary school, the focus is on oral communication skills. In JHS/SHS it is more on reading/writing/test skills.	○	○	○	
They have different approaches to teaching .		○		○
Elementary school English classes have more variety of activities .			○	
Students' attitudes are different.	○			
Teachers' English abilities are different.	○			
Ways of evaluation are different. There is no measurement in elementary school English class.	○			
I have more time with elementary school students than with JHS students.	○			
It is easier to create teaching materials in elementary school.	○	○		
JTEs & ALT's roles are different. In elementary school, ALT has more of a leading role. In JHS, JTE & ALT team-teach, and thus are equal.		○		
In elementary school, I have more time for planning with team-teaching teachers.			○	

(3) What do you think about the introduction of the English subject into elementary school curriculum?

	Mr. D	Ms E	Ms F	Mr. G
It is good to start early .	○		○	○
It will build mental readiness to study a foreign language.	○			
It will give a good language base .	○			
Introduction of textbooks is ...	Good & bad	Good & bad	Good & bad	
They have lost freedom .		○	○	
Classes have become more structured .		○		
We should teach different languages as well.		○		
It is interesting .				○

(4) Do you have any messages that you'd like to communicate to JTEs and other teachers you are working with?

	Mr. D	Ms E	Ms F	Mr. G
Please make effort to communicate with ALTs because Japanese teachers can be role models for students .			○	
Please give me feedback on my class	○			
Please give students time to think , encourage them to use imagination, instead of translating every word we speak into Japanese.		○		
To JHS/SHS teachers, please see more possibilities in your students .		○		
Please try and shorten the gap between elementary school and JHS English.			○	
English is part of education, so please support students' learning processes and broaden their intellectual world .				○

4. Summary and conclusion

In the interviews with the EALTs, we have seen both positive aspects and challenges. As reported by all the EALTs here, one of the positive features of elementary school English class seems to be that stu-

dents show great curiosity toward English language activities. Elementary schools seem to have been successful at “fostering a positive attitude toward communication,” which is part of the aims of junior and senior high school English subject as well since 1989ⁱⁱⁱ.

However, more work is still needed to be done in JHSs and SHSs after twenty years. It seems elementary school Foreign Language Activities classes are showing some models to cultivate such attitudes.

As for challenges, firstly, there is a problem of who should be the main teacher. At the moment, the Foreign Language Activities classes are being team-taught by homeroom teachers and EALTs. Because most of the homeroom teachers are not English teachers, English has been a big problem for them. If this style of teaching is to continue, homeroom teachers need to properly learn how to teach English and English language itself. Or, English teachers should be placed in elementary schools. Ideally, teaching plans should be written in English, so that they can be shared with incoming EALTs, too. It may be hard at the beginning, but can be beneficial for both Japanese teachers and EALTs. Also, team-teaching could take various forms. With experienced EALTs, one class could be split into two groups, and homeroom teacher and EALT could teach separate groups, so that students can get to speak with teachers more. Another important point is that since EALTs are currently visiting different schools, they should be clearly informed of individual students' educational needs by their homeroom teachers.

Secondly, there is confusion at the moment as to what students know and do not know because schools have dealt with English differently in the previous curriculum^{vii}. The introduction of textbooks has both good points and bad points. Homeroom teachers and EALTs now have something to rely on when they are busy, and also the textbooks are easy to follow. However, they have lost originality as one interviewee said, and the activities in the textbooks are sometimes too easy and/or not suitable levels for students who have done similar activities in the previous curriculum.

The elementary school English is at a transitional stage, from a part of the Period for Integrated Studies to the "Foreign Language Activities." The challenges

posed have to be solved at both ministerial and school levels. On the other hand, we see a positive sign in elementary school students' positive attitudes toward the Foreign Language Activities classes. Throughout the interviews, I was impressed by the EALTs' shining eyes when they talked of their students. I saw their professional pride and passion toward teaching. There should be ways to overcome challenges.

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Notes

- i The interviews were carried out in the interviewees' staff rooms in October, 2009.
- ii There are 6 Prefectural EALTs and 323 elementary schools in this prefecture where the interviewees are working. And the City EALTs are working in a city with 71 elementary schools.
- iii It should be noted that the Foreign Language Activities is not included as a part of elementary school "subjects(教科)."
- iv JTEs=Japanese English teachers
- v The interviewees' educational backgrounds related to TESOL and English language teaching experiences are noted after their pseudonyms.
- vi EFL=English as a foreign language
- vii The Course of Study is revised every ten years. "To foster a positive attitude toward communication" has been a part of the English subjects' aims since the revision of 1989.
- viii English language has been taught in the Period for Integrated Studies in many elementary schools since

2002.

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