

Variables that Influence Elementary School Students' English Performance in Japan

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As English has increasingly become popular as a lingua franca, various Asian countries have introduced educational reforms to enhance English instruction. One such reform has been the introduction of English at the elementary school level. Many of the policy decisions on curricula, instructional approach and assessment, however, have been made on a trial-and-error basis. The present study aims to identify those variables that most strongly influence students' performance in learning English at the elementary school level in Japan. The Junior STEP Silver TEST (a proficiency test that measures basic oral skills among young learners) was administered to 6,541 elementary school students who had received various types of English instruction in Japan. We found that the students' grade levels and frequencies of instruction received outside of their schools turned out to be good predictors among those variables that we examined. Other variables including the total hours of English instruction at school and the frequencies of instruction led by foreign teachers at school had less influence on students' performance. Our study also suggests that the one-hour of English instruction commonly taught at schools may exert a different influence on students' performance between middle grade level and upper grade level students.

Key words: English at elementary schools, FLES, Japan

INTRODUCTION

As the English language has gained momentum worldwide, the goals of English education have changed dramatically in many areas where English has traditionally been taught as a foreign language. East Asian countries are no exception. English recently has been introduced at the elementary school level in many East Asian countries as part of a broader reform of English language education. However, elementary school teachers in East Asian countries are for the most part new to English language teaching and face many challenges (Butler, 2004; Nunan, 2003). Furthermore, many of the policy decisions on curricula, instructional approaches and assessment have been made on a trial-and-error basis, given the paucity of empirical data regarding how best to teach English as a foreign language at the elementary school level. The present study aims to develop our understanding on this topic by examining the case of English language education in Japan. Namely, this study examines the relationship between Japanese students' oral proficiency in English and the types of instruction that they receive, and to identify those variables that most heavily influence elementary school students' English performance.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY AT ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS IN JAPAN

Currently in Japan (in 2007), English is not a mandatory academic subject at the elementary school level. However, since 2002, schools have been allowed to introduce "foreign language activities" at their own choosing as part of a program intended to foster international understanding; this program is referred to in the national curriculum as a "Period of Integrated Study." According to the statistics released by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (referred to as MEXT hereafter), 93.6 % of all elementary schools in Japan already were carrying out foreign

language activities in 2005, and such activities were almost exclusively conducted in English. The frequency and form of English activities, however, vary greatly from school to school. Some schools have English activities every day while others have them once a month or even once every trimester. While the “Period of Integrated Study” is part of the uniform curriculum from the 3rd grade and beyond, a growing number of schools have found some way of securing hours for English activities for lower grade levels. MEXT has found that the grade level at which English activities begin also vary from school to school (MEXT, 2006).

Given the substantial diversity of practices, recently there has been heated debate over whether or not the central government should make English a mandatory subject and introduce a degree of uniformity in the English curriculum and instruction. This debate has also extended to how best to implement a nationwide policy if indeed the government decides to do so. According to Kaplan & Baldauf (2005), the following seven policy agendas influence the overall success of language-in-education policies: (1) access policy; (2) personnel policy; (3) curriculum policy; (4) methodology and materials policy; (5) resourcing policy; (6) community policy; and (7) evaluation policy. We will describe below the current state of the implementation of English activities at elementary schools in Japan using these seven policy goals.

First, *Access Policy* deals with “who learns what when?” (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005, p. 1014). In March 2006, a subpanel for MEXT’s Central Council for Education (CCE, an advisory board for the MEXT) submitted a proposal to the CCE that English should be required to be taught for one class period per week at the 5th and 6th grade levels, but that it should not be taught as an academic subject. If this proposal were to become part of the official language-in-education policy, this would mean that all schools would be required to implement English education, but that the schools would not be responsible for assessing and giving grades to the students as in other academic subjects such as math and language arts. However, the actual implications of this proposal are largely unclear. There has been substantial

disagreement among Japanese educators regarding which grade level would be the optimal for schools to begin offering English education and how many hours in the curriculum should be allocated to English. While the debate still continues, seventy-five percent of schools indicated that they had already begun introducing some form of English activities from the 1st grade in 2005 (MEXT, 2006).

Second, *Personnel Policy* concerns issues surrounding the agent of teaching, namely, “who should teach” and “how best to train such teachers.” Currently, homeroom teachers are the ones who have been primarily responsible for conducting English activities in Japan (MEXT, 2006). Homeroom teachers teach multiple subjects but they are not English teachers by training. Some schools have Japanese teachers of English, but their numbers are still very limited. The overwhelming majority of Japanese elementary school teachers, therefore, have not yet received any training in teaching English and they are not confident in either their English proficiency or their ability to adequately conduct English activities (Butler, 2004). Under such circumstances, schools and local governments have been aggressively hiring native English speakers¹ as “assistant language teachers” (“ALTs”) through various channels. In 2005, such ALTs were involved in 60% to 70% of the total hours devoted to English activities at elementary schools in various capacities (MEXT, 2006). ALTs are similarly new, for the most part, to the profession of teaching English as well. While the Japanese government has been planning on increasing the number of ALTs (MEXT, 2003) and has suggested that Japanese teachers employ team-teaching with ALTs (MEXT, 2001), local and foreign teachers have sometimes found it difficult to work together (e.g., Kan, 2002). It is still unclear what role foreign teachers should play in teaching English activities and how best to utilize them as a resource for teaching elementary school students.

Third, *Curriculum Policy* refers to the objectives of learning and teaching

¹ It also appears that non-native English speaking foreign nationals (e.g., Chinese teachers of English) have been hired in elementary schools in Japan to teach English, though the number of such individuals might still be rather limited (Butler, 2007).

the target language. In the case of Japan, as was already mentioned, English has not been recognized as an academic subject but has been allowed to be introduced as part of a focus on developing international understanding. Indeed, MEXT (2001) has described the primary purpose of English activities as being “to foster interests and desire – not to teach a language” (MEXT, 2001, p. 123). Japanese schools have been advised to achieve this goal through conducting conversational activities wherein students can be exposed to daily expressions and terms in English. However, this goal statement has allowed various interpretations to flourish in practice. We can easily wonder what it means to help students enhance their “international understanding” through conversational activities in a foreign language. It is not clear how teachers may expose students to a foreign language without “teaching” it.

Meanwhile, local governments as well as MEXT have begun assigning select schools to serve as pilot schools for conducting various types of experiments and projects related to English activities. This began when the central government started implementing a structural deregulation policy in order to stimulate the economy in 2002. As part of this policy, the government specified certain areas as “special zones for structural reform” (“SZSRs”) (Prime Minister’s Office, n.d.). One result of this policy was that a growing number of local governments received permission from the central government to design their own English activities with different goal specifications. For example, some local governments started English-Japanese immersion programs, while others began teaching English as an academic subject.

The fourth policy agenda relates to methods and materials, namely, *Methodology and Materials Policy*. English activities are for the most part centered around oral communicative activities such as songs, games, and conversational exercises (MEXT, 2006). As of June 2007, there is as yet no nationwide, uniform curriculum or materials for English activities at the elementary school level. Instead there appears to be substantial variation in terms of the methods and materials used in individual classrooms. A number

of local governments have started developing their own curricula and materials which link to those at the secondary school level. In 2006, MEXT announced that they would develop a uniform textbook (to be called "English Notes") for 5th and 6th grade students nationwide ("Sho goroku nennsei" ["5th and 6th graders"], 2006), but the precise content of this textbook has not yet been released as of June 2007.

The fifth agenda is *Resourcing Policy* which deals with financing the policies undertaken by the government. Until 2006, English activities at the elementary school level were largely based on budgets set at the local and central government levels. Securing a sufficient number of native English speakers and other language aids has been a financial challenge for the majority of schools and local administrators. In order to improve English activities at elementary schools, MEXT submitted a budget of 3.8 billion yen (approximately forty million U.S. dollars) for the 2007 fiscal year ("Sho goroku nennsei" ["5th and 6th graders"], 2006). In addition, one cannot ignore the role of the private sector in early English education. The private sector has aggressively approached schools and local governments to provide them with various services, including hiring foreign teachers, training local teachers, and providing teachers with various teaching materials. The private sector also has offered various types of private English lessons and learning materials for elementary school students outside of schools. Although nationwide statistics are not available, a growing number of students appear to receive such additional English lessons outside of school. One can speculate that the influence of such private instruction on children's education may be very large in Japan, as has been reported in other neighboring countries in Asia (e.g., Choi, 2007).

The sixth policy agenda, *Community Policy*, relates to "who is consulted and involved?" (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2005, p. 1014). MEXT has encouraged locally-initiated English language programs. MEXT has thereby encouraged community members, including foreign residents and local individuals who are interested in teaching English to elementary school students, as well as students' parents, to play an active role in designing and conducting English

activities. Some local universities also have been involved in designing and developing curricula and materials for schools as well as in offering teachers' training. However, we should note that there is substantial diversity across Japan in both the form and degree of such community involvement.

Lastly, *Evaluation Policy* deals with the connection between the curriculum/instruction and the assessment of outcomes. Assessment has been largely neglected under the current policy. According to the limited empirical research done to-date on the effectiveness of English activities at the elementary school level in Japan, the results in terms of linguistic attainment have been decidedly mixed. While some studies indicate positive linguistic gains among students (e.g., Chuo Institute for Educational Research, 2002; Katsuyama, Nishigaki, & Wang, 2005), others show little or no effect (e.g., Kajiro, 2005; Shirahata, 2002; Takada, 2004). Most of these studies focused on one or two schools and used different measures. As such the mixed results reported so far may be due to differences in sampling and measurement. Regarding the affective aspects of English education, previous studies have generally indicated positive effects on students' attitudes towards English and foreign cultures (e.g., Higuchi & Miura, 1997; Mino & Kitsudo, 2004), but the relationship between such affective factors and linguistic performance has received little attention so far in Japan. Hardly any objective measurements of English attainment have been employed in the vast majority of Japanese elementary schools. Some teachers ask students to reflect on their performance after lessons, but this is only on an ad-hoc basis. As such it does not provide teachers with sufficient formative information about students' progress in learning.

Given the policy context in Japan described above, the present study has two objectives. First, this study examines English oral proficiency among a large number of elementary school students (beyond the individual school level) using a common set of measurement across Japan. Second, this study examines the relationship between the students' oral proficiency and some of the policy-related variables discussed above. Specifically, this study examines the relationship between oral proficiency and: (a) the grade level of

the students; (b) the instructional goals set by schools; (c) the amount of English instruction that the students received at school; (d) the frequencies of instruction led by foreign teachers (native English speakers); and (e) the amount of English instruction that the students received outside of school.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in this study were 6,541 elementary school students in Japan. They were enrolled in 28 elementary schools (24 public and 4 private elementary schools) across Japan. These schools were recommended through local governments, teachers' associations, and the authors' networks of educators. All of the participating schools were conducting English language activities on a regular basis at the time of data collection (which was during the 2006 academic year in Japan). However, the schools varied greatly in terms of their geographical locations, schools sizes, types and frequencies of English instruction, grade levels at which English instruction began, and types of resources (e.g., financial and human support) that they received from the central or local governments. The participating schools' profiles are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Profiles of Participating Schools

School size	<i>N</i> of schools	School types	<i>N</i> of schools ^(a)	Instructional hours for upper grades ^(b)	<i>N</i> of schools
Less than 50 students	1	Pilot schools ^(a) Assigned by the central government	5	2 times per week (or equivalent)	14
50 – 200	3	Assigned by prefectural governments	1	1.5 times per week (or equivalent)	1

200 – 400	5	Assigned by municipal governments	7	Once per week (or equivalent)	10
400 – 600	4	Schools in the special zones for structural reform (SZSR)	7	Once per month (or equivalent)	3
600 – 800	11	Neither pilot schools nor schools in SZSRs	9		
More than 800	4	Others	3		

Note: (a) The figures shown here include assignments of schools that were received in the past. Some schools were assigned to two categories (i.e., pilot schools in SZSRs). (b) One class hour is approximately 40 to 45 minutes in length.

Each school reviewed sample test items from the Junior STEP Silver Test and decided which grade levels of its students should take the test (a description of the Silver Test is provided below in the section on measurements and procedures). As a result, students between the 3rd and 6th grade levels wound up taking the Silver Test. The breakdown of students who took the test by grade level was as follows: 697 3rd graders; 1,666 4th graders; 2,337 5th graders; and 1,814 6th graders.

The average instructional hours that the participating schools offered per year in 2005 were 64.4 hours (*Standard Deviation, SD* =31.0) for the 3rd graders, 66.0 hours (*SD* = 28.6) for the 4th graders, 66.0 hours (*SD* =28.6) for the 5th graders, and 67.0 hours (*SD* =27.3) for the 6th graders. Since the national average was 12.4 hours to 13.7 hours at these grade levels in 2005 (MEXT, 2006), one can tell that the participating schools offered substantially more hours of instruction for their students compared to the national average. All of the schools participated in this study voluntarily; they had all been actively engaged in teaching English in their own ways and expressed an interest in assessing their students' performance in order to evaluate their efforts so far.

All of the participating schools were asked to submit to the researchers their annual reports on English activities.² Judging from these reports, the

² Japanese schools publish their activity reports for the government and for parents.

primary activities taught at the schools consisted of the following: practicing basic greetings and expressions; listening to and speaking basic daily expressions; exercising daily vocabulary items using cards and other materials; participating in various types of games where students could use expressions and phrases they had learned; and singing songs and chanting English phrases. While the participating schools appeared to employ similar types of activities in the oral domain, the schools differed in the degree to which they taught written language. Some schools employed reading (including reading picture books) and taught the spelling of basic words, while others did not introduce any written language during their English activities.

Measurements and Procedures

The present study employed the Junior STEP Silver Test as the primary measure of outcomes. The Junior STEP Tests were developed by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP). As an organization, STEP was originally established as part of the Japanese Ministry of Education's English language education policy and has administered a number of English proficiency tests since 1963. Their tests have been widely used in schools, business, and other sectors across Japan.³ The Junior STEP Tests were designed to measure basic oral communication abilities among young learners of English as a foreign language. The Junior STEP Tests have three levels, namely, Gold, Silver, and Bronze. In developing the Junior STEP Tests, STEP itself examined a number of curricula and materials that had been employed by pilot schools across Japan as well as various types of commercial English teaching materials available to teachers.

Pilot schools and schools in SZSR zones usually have detailed project reports. Such reports contain the teaching objectives, lesson schedules, select lesson plans, activity contents and results, and other project-related information.

³ Most recently, the Action Plan to "Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities" proposed by MEXT in 2003 employed STEP tests as one of the milestones to describe Japan's goals for English language education (MEXT, 2003).

The Silver level, the middle level among the three, was used in the present study. The Silver Test is designed primarily to measure basic listening skills and word recognition skills among young learners who have experienced oral-based English instruction at school for at least two years. The Silver level was chosen for this study based on the results of a study which had administered the junior STEP Bronze Test (the most elementary level) to 5,087 Japanese elementary school students prior to the present study (Butler & Takeuchi, 2006).

The Junior STEP Silver Test (referred to as the Silver Test hereafter) consists of 53 multiple-choice questions divided into the following four sections: vocabulary, conversation, sentence comprehension, and word recognition (i.e., word recognition and decoding). Children listen to short sentences or conversational exchanges and are asked to choose the appropriate vocabulary and/or the illustrations that accurately describe the content of the sentences and conversations.⁴ The Silver Test takes 35 minutes to administer.

After taking the Silver test, all of the students who participated in this study were asked to answer a short questionnaire. This questionnaire covered: (1) a self-evaluation of their performance in their English activities at school; and (2) their attitudes towards English learning (their interest in English activities at school and their desire to use English). The response rate was .88; out of 6,541 students, 5,741 responses were valid. The students' self-assessment and attitudinal data were used as supplementary information to complement the primary outcome measure, namely, the Junior STEP Silver Test.

Finally, in order to understand what types of instruction the students had received in their English activities at school, in addition to reviewing the schools' annual reports as mentioned above, we distributed a questionnaire to all of the participating schools. The questionnaire distributed to the schools focused on a series of questions regarding: (1) the goals of the English

⁴ Sample items can be seen at the STEP website: http://www.eiken.or.jp/jr_step/s_sample/index.html

activities set by each school; (2) the frequencies and content of their English activities; and (3) the instruction conducted by/with foreign teachers. All of the participating schools returned the questionnaire. While we collected both qualitative and quantitative data through this questionnaire, only the results of the quantitative analyses will be reported in the present study.

RESULTS

The results of our study are presented in the following order. First, we discuss the students' performance on the Silver Test. This is followed by a discussion of their self-evaluations and their attitudes towards English Activities. Second, we report descriptive statistics for the policy related variables discussed above. Finally, we present the relationship between the students' performance on the Silver Test and the policy related variables.

Students' Performance

Students' Performance on the Junior STEP Silver Test

Table 2 shows the students' performance on the Silver Test by grade level. On average, the students scored 65% to 75% on the Silver Test. The mean total scores as well as the subsection scores appear to increase as the grade level increases. A one-way ANOVA indicated that there were significant differences in their mean total scores across grade level ($F(3, 6513) = 170.00, p < .001, \eta^2 = .07$).⁵ However, one can also see that the effect size was not very large. The same results were found in the subsections of the Silver Test

⁵ Upon employing the ANOVA analysis, independence, normality, and homogeneity of variances were checked to see if these could be verified. Since a Levene Test of Equality of Variances indicated that the homogeneity of variance could not be assumed, a Welch test was also employed. The result was the same as with the ANOVA ($F_{Welch}(3, 2543) = 165.7, p < .001$).

as well: *Vocabulary* ($F(3, 6510) = 87.14, p < .001, \eta^2 = .04$); *Conversation* ($F(3, 6510) = 18.18, p < .001, \eta^2 = .03$); *Sentence comprehension* ($F(3, 6510) = 48.79, p < .001, \eta^2 = .02$); and *Word recognition* ($F(3, 6510) = 269.63, p < .001, \eta^2 = .11$). The largest difference in average scores by grade level was found in *Word recognition*.

TABLE 2
Performance by Grade Level (N=6,541)

Grade level	N of students	Total score (SD) (mean %)	Vocabulary (SD) (mean %)	Conversation (SD) (mean %)	Sentence comprehension (SD) (mean %)	Word recognition (SD) (mean %)
3	697	34.87 (6.81) (65.31%)	14.88 (3.32) (64.71%)	6.50 (1.80) (64.96%)	8.76 (1.84) (73.03%)	4.73 (2.10) (59.16%)
4	1,666	38.28 (6.74) (71.74%)	16.33 (3.10) (71.00%)	6.89 (1.70) (68.87%)	9.27 (1.73) (77.23%)	5.80 (2.01) (72.46%)
5	2,337	39.38 (6.51) (73.82%)	16.53 (3.15) (71.86%)	6.99 (1.71) (69.91%)	9.38 (1.74) (78.14%)	6.48 (1.84) (81.04%)
6	1,814	41.04 (5.82) (76.97%)	17.09 (2.90) (74.30%)	7.41 (1.58) (74.06%)	9.66 (1.56) (80.47%)	6.89 (1.64) (86.07%)

Note: The total score possible was 53. The total scores possible for each subsection was as follows: 23 for the Vocabulary subsection; 10 for Conversation; 12 for Sentence comprehension; and 8 for Word recognition.

Students' Self-assessment of Their Performance in English

The students were asked to self-evaluate their performance in English activities at school using a 4-point Likert scale. Table 3 indicates the items and the students' responses to these items. The self-assessment items in Japanese were constructed specifically for this study after reviewing the participating schools' annual reports on their English activities. Since it is important to present self-assessment items in context for young learners in order to increase its validity (Butler & Lee, 2006), we made every effort to write items concretely and clearly for these young grade-level students. All of the items were reviewed by select classroom teachers in order to ensure that the language used in the items was easy enough for young grade level students to understand.

While the majority of the participating students indicated that they could handle simple fixed expressions such as greetings, classroom English, and basic vocabulary items, the students seemed to be less confident in using English beyond simple fixed expressions. An analysis by grade level indicated that, in general, the older the students became, the lower they assessed their own performance (except in greetings and other fixed usages). The coefficient-alpha reliability among the items was high (.92); composite scores were used for the regression analyses below.

TABLE 3
Students' Self-assessment of Their Performance in English Activities at School
(N = 5,741)

Activities	Grades	Responses in percentages (%)					Mean	Skew -ness
		1	2	3	4	No ans.		
1. I can say simple greetings such as "konnichiwa (Hello)" and "ogenki- desuka (How are you?)" in English.	3rd	2.8	8.5	31.2	57.1	.5	3.43	-1.29
	4th	2.7	7.4	33.5	55.7	.7	3.43	-1.28
	5th	2.9	7.7	36.5	52.3	.5	3.39	-1.19
	6th	2.0	6.7	35.2	55.6	.4	3.45	-1.24
2. I can say today's weather in English.	3rd	4.9	6.2	23.0	64.8	1.1	3.49	-1.67
	4th	4.8	10.1	26.8	57.1	1.2	3.38	-1.27
	5th	7.8	12.6	29.8	48.8	1.0	3.21	-.99
	6th	5.2	12.5	35.4	46.1	.9	3.23	-.96
3. I can understand the teachers' directions, such as "honn-o hiraite (Open your book)" and "suwatte (Sit down)" in English.	3rd	4.4	7.5	34.3	52.9	1.0	3.37	-1.28
	4th	4.4	10.7	36.2	47.5	1.2	3.28	-1.04
	5th	4.6	10.8	37.0	46.9	.7	3.27	-1.02
	6th	3.3	11.8	38.8	45.4	.8	3.27	-.92
4. I can say the names of animals, fruits, and vegetables in English.	3rd	2.0	10.9	35.1	50.4	1.6	3.36	-.99
	4th	2.4	9.3	35.3	51.7	1.3	3.38	-1.10
	5th	2.6	11.0	38.4	46.5	1.5	3.31	-.94
	6th	2.2	10.0	43.3	43.7	.9	3.30	-.86
5. I can tell my friends what sports I like such as "watashi-wa suiei-ga sukidesu (I like swimming)" in English.	3rd	6.9	16.2	28.4	47.8	.8	3.18	-.86
	4th	6.5	15.3	33.6	43.5	1.1	3.15	-.83
	5th	8.9	17.3	34.4	38.7	.8	3.04	-.68
	6th	6.5	18.4	34.6	40.0	.6	3.09	-.68
6. I can say "wakarimasen (I don't understand)" in English.	3rd	13.5	16.2	26.6	41.9	1.8	2.99	-.65
	4th	16.8	21.5	27.1	33.0	1.6	2.77	-.34
	5th	16.7	19.3	28.5	34.2	1.3	2.81	-.41
	6th	14.4	20.5	29.0	35.3	.8	2.86	-.45

7. After I started learning English, I feel that I came to be able to tell more about myself to my friends and to listen to my friends as well.	3rd	10.4	17.0	33.8	37.7	1.1	3.00	-.66
	4th	10.7	18.9	37.8	31.5	1.1	2.91	-.54
	5th	14.8	20.6	42.6	21.2	.9	2.71	-.38
	6th	14.2	23.6	42.3	19.0	.9	2.67	-.31
8. I can understand directions when somebody speaks to me in simple English.	3rd	14.8	19.7	44.9	18.9	1.6	2.69	-.41
	4th	14.4	23.2	46.0	14.0	2.3	2.61	-.35
	5th	15.3	26.5	43.4	13.2	1.7	2.55	-.25
	6th	14.1	26.6	47.5	10.3	1.5	2.55	-.33
9. I can sing more than 3 English songs.	3rd	8.3	14.0	24.3	51.9	1.5	3.22	-.98
	4th	11.5	19.2	28.0	40.2	1.1	2.98	-.59
	5th	22.4	23.7	26.8	25.6	1.5	2.56	-.09
	6th	25.6	24.0	25.6	23.5	1.3	2.48	.01
10. I can introduce my family to others in English.	3rd	18.9	19.2	34.7	26.1	1.0	2.69	-.31
	4th	14.1	27.1	35.2	22.4	1.2	2.67	-.20
	5th	14.4	24.9	36.3	23.4	1.0	2.69	-.26
	6th	14.7	27.9	38.2	18.6	.6	2.61	-.18
11. After I started learning English, I feel like I began to be interested in other subjects as well.	3rd	13.7	17.1	38.7	28.7	1.8	2.84	-.51
	4th	14.2	21.5	39.6	22.5	2.1	2.72	-.36
	5th	21.6	25.4	38.7	12.5	1.7	2.43	-.10
	6th	21.0	26.6	39.6	11.2	1.6	2.42	-.11
12. I can say what I did yesterday (such as “kinou piano-o hikimashita I played the piano yesterday”) in English.	3rd	30.7	29.2	28.5	10.4	1.1	2.19	.26
	4th	23.8	32.9	33.4	8.8	1.1	2.27	.10
	5th	25.5	32.2	31.0	10.6	.6	2.27	.16
	6th	24.9	35.4	30.1	8.6	1.0	2.23	.20
13. I can ask my friend what time he/she wakes up in the morning in English.	3rd	30.3	26.6	24.3	17.1	1.6	2.29	.24
	4th	21.7	31.1	30.9	14.3	2.0	2.39	.08
	5th	28.8	30.1	26.0	13.4	1.7	2.24	.27
	6th	27.1	33.5	27.5	10.7	1.3	2.22	.27
14. I can ask the teachers for permission such as “toire-ni itmo iidesuka (May I go to the bathroom)” in English.	3rd	35.9	22.7	23.0	16.2	2.3	2.20	.34
	4th	29.5	28.7	23.9	16.5	1.4	2.28	.26
	5th	34.3	29.1	21.0	14.3	1.4	2.15	.43
	6th	27.8	28.2	21.6	21.2	1.0	2.37	.19

Note: The students were asked to respond to how well they could conduct the listed activities in class: 1 = I cannot do it; 2 = So-so; 3 = I can do it well; 4 = I can do it very well.

The English translations (shown above in parentheses) for the items were not provided to the students.

Students' Attitudes Towards English Activities

As mentioned above, the Japanese government set the primary goal of

English activities as being to foster students' interest and motivation in learning English and learning about foreign cultures. We therefore examined the students' attitudes towards English activities in addition to their performance on the Silver Test. Students were asked two attitudinal questions our survey: (1) what their attitudes were towards English activities at school; and (2) what their attitudes were towards using English in general. The students were asked to indicate their responses using a 4-point Likert scale.

In examining the students' attitudes towards English activities at school, we asked students about 12 items which were drawn from their most commonly conducted activities (based on the participating schools' annual reports on their English activities). Table 4 summarizes the results by grade level. The coefficient-alpha reliability was high (.89). The items in the table are listed in the order of higher average negative skewness values. The students in general appeared to have fun doing activities such as playing games and singing songs. However, the students also appeared to quickly lose interest in games and songs as they got older. We also found that items such as "to learn about the lives of people in other countries" (item 10) and "to talk to people in other countries" (item 11) are not necessarily highly appreciated by students across grade levels, despite the fact that they are the central purpose of English activities according to MEXT.

TABLE 4
Students' Attitudes Towards English Activities (N = 5,741)

Activities	Grade	Responses in percentages (%)					Mean	Skewness
		1	2	3	4	No ans.		
1. To play games in English.	3rd	2.3	1.8	17.9	77.7	.3	3.72	-2.59
	4th	2.0	1.4	21.0	74.5	1.1	3.70	-2.40
	5th	4.0	2.1	33.7	59.8	.4	3.50	-1.71
	6th	17.2	4.8	61.4	16.3	.4	3.42	-1.50
2. To learn new words in English such as the names of animals and fruits.	3rd	5.1	4.2	31.3	58.9	.5	3.45	-1.58
	4th	4.2	5.2	37.7	51.6	1.2	3.38	-1.34
	5th	9.1	6.8	46.3	36.7	1.0	3.12	-1.01
	6th	9.2	6.2	49.0	34.8	.8	3.10	-1.02

3. To sing English songs.	3rd	4.8	2.1	47.6	45.0	.5	3.34	-1.33
	4th	2.0	1.4	21.3	75.3	1.1	3.21	-1.20
	5th	16.2	4.3	63.4	16.2	.3	2.80	-.92
	6th	17.3	4.8	61.6	16.3	.4	2.77	-.86
4. To be understood by the teacher when I use English	3rd	5.1	5.4	42.7	45.8	1.0	3.31	-1.22
	4th	5.3	9.3	40.9	42.6	1.8	3.23	-1.02
	5th	7.9	11.2	46.2	33.9	.8	3.07	-.85
	6th	9.6	8.6	46.2	35.2	.5	3.07	-.93
5. To greet people in English.	3rd	5.1	5.2	41.9	46.5	1.3	3.32	-1.24
	4th	6.1	7.0	47.3	38.1	1.5	3.19	-1.05
	5th	11.0	9.5	54.3	24.2	1.0	2.93	-.83
	6th	10.8	8.6	54.1	25.9	.5	2.96	-.86
6. To listen to what the teacher says in English.	3rd	6.2	5.7	55.8	31.5	.8	3.13	-1.04
	4th	7.9	5.8	59.6	24.8	1.9	3.03	-1.02
	5th	15.9	8.2	60.9	13.8	1.3	2.73	-.82
	6th	16.0	5.7	61.6	15.8	.9	2.78	-.87
7. To ask questions in English to my friends and teachers.	3rd	9.6	10.4	45.4	34.1	.5	3.04	-.85
	4th	11.1	11.0	49.6	26.8	1.4	2.94	-.77
	5th	16.3	14.7	49.1	19.1	.9	2.72	-.53
	6th	17.6	12.7	49.6	19.5	.7	2.71	-.55
8. To write English words.	3rd	10.0	26.9	26.3	35.6	1.3	2.89	-.36
	4th	11.2	16.1	35.1	35.7	1.9	2.97	-.65
	5th	18.3	12.4	38.0	30.2	1.1	2.81	-.53
	6th	13.7	10.9	42.4	31.9	1.1	2.94	-.73
9. To read English words.	3rd	12.1	24.6	33.1	29.2	1.0	2.80	-.34
	4th	13.9	15.1	37.7	31.6	1.6	2.89	-.58
	5th	17.2	13.2	39.5	29.3	.8	2.82	-.54
	6th	14.7	11.0	41.6	32.2	.5	2.92	-.70
10. To learn about the lives of People (e.g., festivals) in other countries.	3rd	8.5	19.2	29.2	42.4	.7	3.06	-.67
	4th	8.4	21.7	33.7	34.5	1.6	2.96	-.51
	5th	12.4	20.5	36.5	29.5	1.1	2.84	-.45
	6th	10.6	17.8	38.4	32.3	.8	2.93	-.58
11. To talk to people in other countries.	3rd	9.3	25.1	25.0	40.1	.5	2.96	-.47
	4th	10.6	21.9	25.3	41.1	1.1	2.98	-.55
	5th	12.2	24.1	30.4	32.6	.7	2.84	-.38
	6th	10.5	21.4	33.1	34.7	.4	2.92	-.50
12. To read English picture stories with my teacher and friends.	3rd	11.3	11.7	33.9	41.6	1.5	3.07	-.84
	4th	12.5	17.8	38.1	29.6	2.0	2.87	-.52
	5th	22.7	19.3	43.8	13.0	1.1	2.48	-.24
	6th	23.1	18.6	45.6	11.9	.8	2.47	-.27

Note: The students were asked to respond how much they enjoyed the specified activities in class. 1 = Not fun; 2 = So-so; 3 = Fun; 4 = Very fun.

Regarding the students' motivations for using English, we prepared 10 items to assess their motivations, as shown in Table 5. In general, the students' overall motivation for using English tended to decrease as they became older. The coefficient-alpha reliability was again very high (.91), and composite scores were again used for the following analyses.

TABLE 5
Students' Motivations for Using English (N = 5,741)

Activities	Grade	Responses in percentages(%)					No ans.	Mean	Skew -ness
		1	2	3	4				
1. I want to travel to foreign countries.	3rd	10.0	7.7	17.5	62.8	2.1	3.36	-1.38	
	4th	7.2	8.7	19.6	63.6	1.0	3.41	-1.45	
	5th	5.3	8.4	19.2	65.8	1.2	3.47	-1.58	
	6th	4.6	7.3	18.9	68.2	1.0	3.52	-1.73	
2. I want to know much about foreign countries.	3rd	5.5	9.1	26.6	56.1	2.6	3.37	-1.31	
	4th	6.6	11.0	26.0	55.3	1.0	3.31	-1.18	
	5th	7.3	14.8	30.6	46.0	1.3	3.17	-.88	
	6th	5.8	12.0	34.4	46.8	.9	3.23	-.99	
3. I want to help foreigners who cannot speak Japanese.	3rd	7.0	7.5	26.1	56.9	2.4	3.36	-1.37	
	4th	6.4	10.8	31.0	50.7	1.1	3.27	-1.10	
	5th	9.0	15.0	34.8	39.7	1.5	3.07	-.76	
	6th	6.9	16.1	37.8	38.0	1.2	3.08	-.73	
4. I want to make many friends with foreigners who live in Japan.	3rd	9.5	12.9	25.4	49.6	2.6	3.18	-.96	
	4th	9.1	14.6	26.3	48.6	1.4	3.16	-.89	
	5th	10.1	18.8	30.3	39.2	1.6	3.00	-.62	
	6th	9.3	16.6	33.2	39.6	1.2	3.04	-.71	
5. I want to live in a foreign country.	3rd	19.4	10.3	23.3	44.7	2.3	2.95	-.67	
	4th	15.5	15.1	22.8	45.2	1.5	2.99	-.67	
	5th	15.8	14.8	23.9	44.0	1.5	2.97	-.65	
	6th	14.1	14.3	23.7	46.7	1.2	3.04	-.75	
6. I want to study foreign languages other than English as well.	3rd	11.9	12.2	23.5	49.9	2.4	3.14	-.92	
	4th	12.4	14.7	24.3	46.5	2.1	3.07	-.78	
	5th	15.4	17.1	25.7	40.0	1.8	2.92	-.55	
	6th	13.7	15.3	29.0	40.1	1.9	2.97	-.65	
7. I want to tell foreigners many things about Japan.	3rd	8.5	12.2	26.9	49.6	2.8	3.21	-1.01	
	4th	9.4	16.3	28.1	44.6	1.5	3.10	-.77	
	5th	12.6	19.7	31.7	34.6	1.5	2.90	-.50	
	6th	10.6	21.3	36.2	30.5	1.4	2.88	-.46	
8. I want to read lots of books in English.	3rd	12.1	15.5	28.2	41.8	2.4	3.02	-.71	
	4th	14.1	17.3	30.1	37.1	1.4	2.92	-.56	
	5th	18.8	24.3	30.4	24.9	1.6	2.62	-.17	
	6th	17.7	26.8	27.7	26.7	1.1	2.64	-.14	

9. I want to exchange email with foreigners.	3rd	20.1	18.4	26.3	32.6	2.6	2.73	-.32
	4th	18.5	20.9	29.0	30.2	1.4	2.72	-.29
	5th	21.6	24.3	25.2	27.2	1.7	2.59	-.10
	6th	19.0	23.2	29.9	26.8	1.2	2.65	-.21
10. I want to have a job where I can use English.	3rd	17.3	20.9	36.2	22.8	2.8	2.66	-.29
	4th	19.7	23.2	33.6	22.1	1.5	2.59	-.17
	5th	23.5	27.8	31.3	15.6	1.8	2.40	.05
	6th	19.4	28.4	31.2	19.5	1.4	2.52	-.04

Note: The students were asked to respond how much they wished to use English in the listed activities. 1 = I do not want to do it; 2 = So-so; 3 = I want to do it ; 4 = I want to do it very much.

Descriptive Statistics for our Findings Regarding Policy Related Variables

The descriptive statistics related to our findings are presented in the following order: (1) instructional goals set by the school; (2) total accumulated instructional hours that the students had received at school; (3) the frequencies of instruction led by foreign teachers; and (4) the English instruction that students received outside of school.

Instructional Goals Set by the Schools

The participating schools were asked to indicate the degree of importance for achieving 12 goals of English activities using a 7-point Likert scale. The twelve goal items were constructed based on Butler (2004) as well as the goal statements described in the participating schools' activity reports. The results are summarized in Table 6. The items are listed in order of higher negative skewness values in the table.

It was found that the participating schools generally rated highly on items related to listening and speaking greetings and basic expressions as well as items related to international understanding. However, items related to writing were generally seen as being less important. The responses deviated among participating schools with regards to items concerning decoding and pronunciation. Since the coefficient-alpha reliability was high (.89), composite scores were used for the analyses below.

TABLE 6
Instructional Goals Set by the Schools (N = 28)

Goals	Frequencies								Mean	Skew -ness
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	No ans.		
1. To be able to listen and understand greetings and standard expressions in English.	1	0	0	2	3	7	15	0	6.11	-2.25
2. To become interested in English-speaking people and cultures.	1	0	0	3	4	8	12	0	5.89	-1.82
3. To become interested in foreign residents in the community and world affairs in general.	1	0	1	2	4	8	11	1	5.81	-1.70
4. To be able to listen and understand simple stories.	1	1	0	6	3	9	8	0	5.43	-1.15
5. To be able to greet and say some standard expressions.	0	0	1	4	6	4	13	0	5.86	-0.65
6. To be able to carry a simple conversation in English.	4	3	1	4	4	7	5	0	4.50	-0.52
7. To be able to acquire native-like pronunciation.	8	1	2	3	4	4	5	1	3.96	-0.13
8. To be able to sound out English words accurately (i.e., acquiring basic decoding skills in English).	6	2	4	6	3	3	4	0	3.82	0.07
9. To be able to read and comprehend simple words and phrases.	8	2	4	4	4	1	5	0	3.61	0.25
10. To be able to read and comprehend simple short stories.	14	1	2	4	5	0	1	1	2.59	0.68
11. To be able to spell some words and phrases.	14	3	4	2	2	0	3	0	2.54	1.21
12. To be able to write simple short stories.	21	2	2	3	0	0	0	0	1.54	1.73

Note:

Q: To what degree does your school believe that the following goals for learning English should be achieved by your students by the time they finish elementary school?

1 = Not appropriate

2 = 10-15% of elementary school students should achieve this goal

3 = 30-35%

4 = 50%

5 = 65-70%

6 = 80-85%

7 = 100%

Total Accumulated Instructional Hours by Grade

The means for the total (accumulated) English instructional hours that the students had received at school by the time they participated in the present study were 76.4 hours ($SD = 41.6$) for the 3rd graders, 111.5 hours ($SD = 65.7$) for the 4th graders, 135.6 hours ($SD = 85.2$) for the 5th graders and 155.3 hours ($SD = 111.3$) for the 6th graders. Note that the standard deviations were large; there was substantial variability in this variable among the participating students who belonged to the same grade level.

The Frequencies of Instruction Led by/with Foreign Teachers

The frequencies of English activities led by or with foreign teachers among the participating schools were as follows: (1) 1 school had a full-time foreign teacher; (2) 9 schools had instruction led by foreign teachers twice a week; (3) 8 schools had such instruction once per week; (4) 1 school had such instruction every other week; (5) 4 schools had such instruction once per month; (6) 2 schools had such instruction once every other month; (7) 1 school had such instruction once in every trimester; and (8) 2 schools had no such instruction led by foreign teachers.

The participating schools which had foreign teachers usually had some form of team-teaching, but the ways in which the team-teaching was conducted appeared to vary from school to school. The most common pattern of team-teaching was the combination of a foreign teacher and a homeroom teacher (18 schools), followed by the combination of a foreign teacher and a Japanese Teacher of English (11 schools).

English Instruction Received Outside of the School

Finally, the questionnaire answered by the students also revealed that 1,506 students (26.2%) were receiving some form of English lessons outside of their schools. The number of students receiving such lessons included 151

students (24.9%) among the 3rd graders, 342 students (23.3%) among the 4th graders, 554 students (26.4%) among the 5th graders, and 453 students (29.9%) among the 6th graders. The percentage of students who received such extra English lessons appeared to increase slightly as the grade level increased. The majority of such students were going to local private language institutes; 1,107 students in total (19.3% of all students and 72.3% of the students who received extra English lessons) were going to private language institutes on a regular basis.

The Relationship Between the Silver Test and the Policy-related Variables

First, the correlations among variables were computed, as shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
Correlations Among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Silver Test scores								
2. Self-assessment	.37*							
3. Attitudes (1): Attitudes towards English activities at school	.15*	.64*						
4. Attitudes (2): Motivation to use English	.12*	.56*	.66*					
5. Grade level	.24*	-.08	-.16*	-.07*				
6. Goals set by the schools	.12*	.03	-.06*	-.04*	-.11*			
7. Total hours of instruction at school	.13*	.16*	.06*	-.02	.19*	-.04*		
8. Frequencies of instruction by foreign teachers at school	-.18*	-.01	.12*	.09*	-.11*	-.02	-.28*	
9. Extra lessons received outside of school	.35*	.31*	.11*	.09*	.05*	.08*	.02	-.12*

Note: * $p < .01$

Extra lessons outside of school, and grade level were moderately correlated with the students' performance on the Silver Test. The frequency of instruction received by foreign teachers showed a negative correlation with

the students' Silver Test scores. Although the correlations were generally not high, grade level was negatively correlated with all the other independent variables except total hours of instruction received at school and extra English lessons outside of school. Students' self-assessment was relatively highly correlated with their attitudes towards English activities and their motivation to use English, and moderately correlated with the Silver Test.

Second, a multiple regression analysis was performed in order to find out which variables were good predictors of the students' performance on the Silver Test. Before employing the multiple regression analysis, a series of diagnostics were performed to make sure that all of the requisite assumptions were met. The possibility of multicollinearity among the independent variables was of particular concern. However, the VIF values did not indicate serious multicollinearity.⁶ As Table 8 indicates, the β value was highest for extra English lessons received outside of school, followed by grade level. The β values for the total hours of instruction at school and the frequencies of lessons received by foreign teachers at school did not turn out to be high. One also has to remember that R^2 itself is not high; most of the variances were not explained by the variables that we examined.

TABLE 8
Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the Silver Test Scores

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Grade	1.51	.08	.23	18.05**
Goals set by the schools	.81	.08	.13	10.28**
Total hours of instruction at school	.01	.001	.06	4.67**
Frequencies of instruction by foreign teachers at school	-.40	.05	-.09	-7.36**
Extra lessons received outside of school	1.36	.05	.31	25.49**

Notes: ** $p < .01$, Adjusted $R^2 = .20$, Standard error of the estimates = 5.69

Another multiple regression analysis was conducted only among the students

⁶ Our decision was based on Neter, Wasserman & Kutner (1990). Since the maximum VIF values did not exceed 10 among the independent variables, we treated the data under the assumption that there was not a strong presence of multicollinearity.

who did not receive any English instruction outside of the school. As shown in Table 9, the same results were obtained; the β value was highest for grade level while the β values for the total hours of instruction at school and the frequencies of instruction received from foreign teachers were low.

Table 9
Multiple Regression Analysis for Variables Predicting the Silver Test Scores
(for only those students who did not receive English instruction
outside of their school)

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>t</i>
Grade	1.57	.09	.25	16.67**
Goals set by the schools	.58	.09	.09	6.09**
Total hours of instruction at school	.003	.001	.04	2.26*
Frequencies of instruction by foreign teachers at school	-.72	.08	-.14	-8.85**

Notes: ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$ Adjusted $R^2 = .10$, Standard error of the estimates = 5.77

The fact that the total hours of instruction did not seem to be a good predictor for the students' performance on the Silver Test suggests the possibility that the one-hour block of instruction commonly taught might have exerted a different influence on students' performance on the Silver Test. Therefore, we calculated the correlations between the Silver Test scores and "the total accumulated hours of instruction that the students had received" and "the hours of instruction per week at school" for each grade level. The results are summarized in Table 10. Admittedly, Pearson correlation coefficients were not high in general; the correlations were not even significant at the 3rd grade level. The correlations were negative (or statistically non-significant) at

TABLE 10
Correlations between the Silver Test, the Total (Accumulated) Number of Instructional Hours, and the Number of Instructional Hours per Week by Grade Level

Grade	No. students	Total hours of instruction	Hours of instruction per week
3	604	-.08	-.09
4	1,448	-.13*	-.11*
5	2,091	.19*	.19*
6	1,506	.13*	.10*

Note: * $p < .01$

the 3rd and 4th grade levels, but turned positive at the upper grade levels. Table 11 summarizes the results of multiple regressions for each grade level. The β values for the total hours of instruction were again negative for the 3rd and 4th grade levels and turned positive for the upper grade levels.

TABLE 11
Multiple Regression Analysis (β values) for Variables Predicting the Silver Test Scores by Grade

	Grade			
	3	4	5	6
Goals set by the schools	.22*	.09*	.08*	.15*
Total hours of instruction at school	-.02*	-.13*	.12*	.12*
Frequencies of instruction by foreign teachers at school	-.24*	-.08*	-.15*	-.04*
Extra lessons received outside of school	.29*	.36*	.31*	.31*

Note: * $p < .01$, Adjusted $R^2 = .17$ for the 3rd grade, Adjusted $R^2 = .17$ for the 4th grade, Adjusted $R^2 = .18$ for the 5th grade, and Adjusted $R^2 = .14$ for the 6th grade.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined English proficiency among Japanese elementary school students who had received various types and frequencies of English instruction (or what MEXT refers to as “English activities”). The aim of this study was to identify those variables that influence students’ performance. To accomplish this, this study employed an objective test, the STEP Silver Test, as well as surveys and additional background research on the schools participating in this study.

Our study found that the participating students’ scores increased as their grade level increased. The biggest performance gap by grade level was found in the subsection on “Word Recognition” in the STEP Silver Test. This section tested the students’ word recognition and decoding skills, while the other three sections dealt only with the oral domain. The performance gap by age in the word recognition section in the presents study might have been a reflection of the level of written instruction at the participating schools, since

written language instruction was implemented primarily during the upper grade levels (this was the case at the majority of participating schools).

There has been substantial debate over when and how written instruction should be introduced at the elementary school in Japan. Recently, MEXT has been hesitant to introduce written English at the elementary school level as part of its educational policy. According to MEXT, the rationale behind its current policy has been that the simultaneous introduction of sounds and letters would be overwhelming for Japanese students and would hinder their oral acquisition and motivation (MEXT, 2001). However, to the extent of the present authors' knowledge, there has been no empirical evidence presented which would support such a claim. While the central policy does not promote written instruction in English activities, MEXT's most recent statistics indicate that a growing number of Japanese elementary schools have already begun introducing written language instruction in some form, especially at the upper grade levels (MEXT, 2006). There is a clear need to examine closely how written instruction has been employed at each grade level as well as how such instruction has helped (or hindered) children in attaining spoken proficiency as well as written proficiency in English.

The present study also examined students' self-assessment of their own performance in English Activities at school as well as their attitudes towards such activities. Recently, self-assessment has gained increasing attention in language education (as can be seen, for instance, by the "Can Do Statement" in the Common European Framework of Reference, Hasselgreen, 2005). In higher education in particular, there has been substantial research on how best to incorporate self-assessment into curricula and lessons in order to help students learn various subjects. Some of the key aspects of successful self-assessments include: (1) setting up clear criteria; (2) providing feedback to students; (3) inviting students to be part of the process of developing the self-assessment itself; (4) withholding grades until students complete their self-assessments; and so forth (e.g., Taras, 2001). However, we know relatively little about elementary school students' ability to reliably assess their own performance, or how best to implement self-assessment in foreign language

classes at their level (Butler & Lee, 2006). Given the fact that the participating students in the present study were assumed to have little experience in conducting self-assessments in English (or in any other subjects for that matter), the present self-assessment data needs to be used as supplementary information. Nevertheless, we believe that it provides us with useful information about the effectiveness of current English activities in Japan. Under current teaching practices, while many students felt comfortable with greetings, simple expressions, and vocabulary, they were less confident in using English beyond such simple fixed expressions.

The students' attitudinal data also suggested that while a majority of the students appeared to enjoy most of the activities in English, the upper grade students started losing their interest towards activities such as practicing greetings and playing games. Their motivation to use English appeared to decrease as the students became older. It would make sense for schools and curriculum developers to include age-appropriate activities at each grade level in order to keep the students more motivated.

Among the policy related variables that we examined in the present study, the strongest predictor of the students' performance on the Silver Test was the amount of lessons that the students received outside of their school. This result is somewhat unsurprising given the fact that the private education sector in Japan has aggressively recruited young students in recent years. In other East Asian countries where English has already been introduced as an academic subject at elementary schools such as in South Korea and Taiwan, access to extra lessons outside of school appears to be one of the most influential factors in creating achievement gaps (Butler, 2005). One can assume that the extent to which students can afford extra English lessons outside of their school is highly correlated with their socio-economic status (SES). If this assumption is correct, then the present results also suggest that the students' SES may have a sizable influence on their English mastery in Japan as well. Moreover, as mentioned above, since there is substantial variability in the frequencies and types of English instruction across regions and schools, serious consideration has to be given to the issue of accessibility

to English education and its impact on students' performance.

Interestingly, the total hours of instruction at school did not turn out to be an influential variable in the present study. This result may be related to the content and/or the quality of instruction in "English Activities" at elementary schools in Japan. One can frequently observe that much of the instructional time is spent on games, simple repetitions of greetings, and practicing fixed sets of expressions. It is possible that such activities might not contribute significantly to the students' communicative performance in English.

It is also possible that the effect of the one-hour of English instruction typically seen in elementary schools in Japan may have a qualitatively different impact on students' performance across grade levels. Indeed, both the total instructional hours that the students received at school and the hours of instruction per week had negative correlations (or no correlations) with English performance among 3rd and 4th grade students, while the correlations turned out to be positive among 5th and 6th grade students. This suggests that the degree of influence that the one class-hour of instruction has on young learners' English proficiency may be different for students in middle and upper grade levels. It would therefore seem to make sense for policymaking entities in the government to carefully examine the quality of instruction at each grade level before hastily introducing English at younger grade levels. It is also advisable for policy makers to carefully examine how best to utilize native speakers as a resource in the English instruction at elementary schools, given the fact that the frequencies of their involvement in instruction did not appear to positively contribute to students' performance in the present study.

While the present study focused on the case of Japan, which has its own distinct policy and social context surrounding the implementation of English at the elementary school level, there are a number of issues that are also of common concern and the focus of debate in other East Asian countries. The amount of instructional hours at school, the degree of foreign teachers' involvement in English instruction, and the impact of additional English lessons outside of school are all common areas of concern in other neighboring countries. It is important to accumulate and exchange empirical

research that examines the close relationship between the content of instruction and its influence on young students' English performance.

Finally, the present study employed an oral proficiency test, namely the Silver STEP Test. This test aims to measure one aspect of students' communicative abilities in English (i.e., their oral abilities) and therefore, we should acknowledge that the present discussion is limited to the oral domain based on this single measurement. There is no doubt that more empirical data, based on multiple measures, is necessary in order to accurately capture the effectiveness of the present form of English education at the elementary school level in Japan. In particular, as mentioned before, it would be particularly informative to conduct a close examination of the quality of instruction at each age level and its relationship to students' acquisition of English.

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