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ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH

Elementary schools to get English

By Takahiro Fukada

Starting next fiscal year, all elementary schools will be required to introduce compulsory English lessons for fifth- and sixth-graders. The scores of Japanese who take the Test of English as a Foreign Language are among the lowest in Asia, and thus their proficiency levels are low as well, whereas other parts of Asia are making English education compulsory in elementary school.

Following are basic questions and answers about compulsory English education in elementary schools:

What will be the class frequency and who will teach the language?

From fiscal 2011, all fifth- and sixth-graders nationwide will have one lesson per week. Although the education ministry calls the lesson Gaikokugo Katsudo (Foreign Language Activities), English is the priority. The goal of the new curriculum is to help children experience and understand other languages and cultures, and nurture an inclination to actively communicate with others by becoming familiar with the sounds and basic expressions of another language, according to the ministry.

However, many schools will not have experienced teachers with specialized skills in English education, and some homeroom teachers will have to teach English even if they lack a good understanding of the language.

Since fiscal 2007, the government has been directly or indirectly training all of the nation's approximately 400,000 elementary school teachers in teaching English, but surveys show many lack the confidence to lead such lessons. Some schools, especially in urban areas, will have native English-speaking teachers to help, but others will not.

Why will compulsory English education start in elementary school?

The ministry said there are international and domestic factors behind the move. TOEFL score data for 2004-2005 put Japan next to last in Asia, with only 191 points — just one point better than North Korea. Afghanistan exceeded Japan by seven points, while Singapore had the top score at 254.

“To further internationalize Japanese themselves and raise human resources (who) can work competently in international society, it is necessary to consolidate English education as a national strategy,” a report by a ministry panel on English education says.

More and more countries are introducing English education in elementary schools, the ministry said. Thailand in 1996 made English education compulsory. South Korea did so in 1997 and China followed suit in 2001. The European Union is also promoting foreign-language education from an early age, aiming for children to learn two languages other than their mother tongue. In Japan, elementary schools have already started teaching English. The ministry said in fiscal 2007 that 97 percent had introduced some form of English lessons.

However, the frequency of lessons varies from school to school, with some having classes once or twice a week and others only once a term. This prompted the ministry to establish the minimum standard for compulsory English education.

Who are the main proponents of compulsory English education?

The Japan Business Federation (Nippon Keidanren), the nation’s most powerful business lobby, strongly backs compulsory English at elementary schools, according to the book *Dosuru Shogakko Eigo* [What to do with Elementary School English] by academics Shigemitsu Ahara and Masaru Takiguchi. The book says Keidanren wants schools to train Japanese who can use English, which is necessary for major corporations to expand globally. The business lobby said in a survey that numerous companies don’t have enough employees proficient in English. This costs companies both time and money to rectify.

Keidanren said English education in Japan has been centered on reading and writing, and this hasn’t improved students’ abilities to listen and speak. “To strengthen practical English proficiency, it is important to start English education from the earliest possible age and (children) should get accustomed to listening to English,” the book says, quoting Keidanren’s proposal in 2000.

Aside from the business lobby, parents themselves are considered major supporters of making English education compulsory in elementary schools. The ministry said around 70 percent of guardians in its 2005 survey gave positive answers on making English compulsory in elementary schools.

Are there objections?

Yes. The book *Dosuru Shogakko Eigo* says introducing English education at the elementary school level is “too hasty” because it could create a situation in which unlicensed teachers plan and execute lessons without proper training.

Kumiko Torikai, a noted simultaneous interpreter and a professor of cross-cultural communications at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, says there is no clear difference in the English proficiency of people who studied the language in elementary schools and those who took it up later.

“It seems to be a considerably reckless attempt (for the government) to make English compulsory even though there are no such data” supporting the usefulness of compulsory English education in elementary schools, Torikai says in her book, *Ayaushi! Shogakko Eigo* [Dangerous! Elementary School English].

Torikai also notes that historically famous figures mastered the language at very late ages. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835-1901), a philosopher who later founded Keio University in Tokyo, started studying English at age 24 and established an English-language school several years later.

“There are sufficient ways for people to master high-level English by starting to learn it beginning in junior high school,” Torikai argues.

Hiromichi Moteki, author of *Shogakkoni Eigowa Hitsuyonai* [English is not Necessary in Elementary Schools], claims students will need 2,000 hours of training with native speakers to master the language. “You will never be able to make English your own unless spending some ‘absolute time,’” Moteki says in his book.

Mutsumi Imai, a cognitive science scholar, said in the book *Shogakkodeno Eigokyoikuwa Hitsuyonai!* [English Education at Elementary School is Not Necessary] that students should spend more time studying Japanese reading comprehension, composition, arithmetic and science because they can master English even after junior high school with motivation and good educational opportunities.

Imai said the ability to correctly analyze one’s mother tongue, think logically, clearly summarize and correctly express one’s notions in one’s native language are the very foundations of learning other languages.