

## Teaching English in Elementary Schools

### English topic of the week

Welcome to our fourth English topic of the week. Today we would like to talk about teaching English in elementary school. New Education Minister Bunmei Ibuki feels that other problems need to be addressed before teaching English in elementary school. He is concerned about elementary school students learning the social rules of Japan first. He is also concerned about declining academic ability and the many children who he claims do not write or speak decent Japanese.

We are not quite sure what social rules he is referring to. Based on his age of 68, we imagine that Ibuki remembers a Japan where women walked behind men. While Japanese society does need to teach its children the social rules of Japan, we are sure that these are not the rules of Ibuki's childhood. Those days are over. As Japan becomes a freer society, the rules are changing. Conservatives like Ibuki are naturally against such change. That is what being a conservative means. All over the world, conservatives want to bring the past back. It is not going to happen and Ibuki should use his energy to implement change that will help Japan. He cannot successfully fight the tide.

As to Japanese children having declining academic ability, reductions in school time and discipline over past years have certainly caused this decline. Some people regret this and feel Japan should return to the old system, striving for academic excellence at the cost of play time. Others think that the old system is not appropriate today and more balance is required. Students should have time to play and be children.

Moving to Ibuki's claim that many children do not write or speak decent Japanese, he is probably correct. However, we doubt that this is a recent historical development. We imagine that this has always been the case in Japan. It certainly has always been the case in America that many children do not write or speak decent English. Until we see substantial changes in values and socio-economics, this is likely to remain the same in Japan and America.

So, instead of teaching English in elementary school, Ibuki would like to address the above problems. We see several problems with Ibuki's approach. First, solving these problems is not something that elementary schools have the budget or staff or time to do. Most of these problems need to be addressed at home. Second, again for socio-economic reasons, not every family can successfully address these problems. Third, English education in Japan needs to be improved. Teaching English in elementary school is one way to do this.

Spending several hours a week studying English will not have a major effect on students' Japanese language education. If done properly though, it could have a major effect on English language education, helping students to become better at English.