

Reforming English Education in Japan: A Survey with Elementary School Teachers

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Abstract

With a view to the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has introduced a large scale reform of English education, this time outlining specific goals for elementary schools across Japan. Committees were formed as early as 2010, with active implementation efforts since 2014, but there are concerns that teachers in elementary schools are not fully prepared. Concerns relate to the current levels of English ability among teachers, the lack of an adequate and experienced number of knowledgeable teachers, as well as a paucity of pedagogical support and teaching materials. This short article reports on a survey conducted with a group of Japanese elementary school teachers preceding a compulsory two-day in-service training workshop at Saga University. Elementary school teacher training is briefly discussed, while attitudes toward English, the role of culture in language teaching, and teacher attitudes and preparedness are explored alongside the survey results.

[Keywords] : *Japan, elementary schools, teacher training, English language education, intercultural communicative competence*

1. Introduction

The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) has developed a new vision for English education that aims to establish ‘an educational environment which corresponds to globalization from the elementary to lower/upper secondary education stage’ (MEXT, 2016). The goal is to enhance English education... ‘throughout elementary to lower/secondary school, upon strengthening English education in elementary school in addition to further advancing English education in lower/upper secondary school’. This vision, welcomed from various corners in the Japanese educational arena, is timed to see a full-scale deployment with the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and incremental educational reforms have been taking place since April 2014. In general, it is a broad but specified effort at revamping English education in Japan in response to governmental requirements for globalising its workforce (MEXT, 2016). It also mirrors advances elsewhere, such as the development of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which is finding local application in what has been introduced in Japan as the CEFR-J. The ministry outlines two broad purposes incorporated in its vision: 1) a new English education corresponding to globalization, and 2)

the construction of necessary frameworks for new English education – ‘with vigorous promotion from 2014’ (MEXT, 2016).

2. What of culture? A new English Education corresponding to globalization

It is notable that in contrast to earlier English education reforms, which largely addressed English education in junior high and secondary schools, the current reform also details specific tasks and responsibilities aimed at English education in elementary schools. To prepare students for globalisation, the ministry outlines the following requirements:

- a) 3rd and 4th graders are to participate in English language activities 1-2 times per week, supervised by the class teacher, in order to nurture the foundation of communication skills; and
- b) 5th and 6th graders will receive English language (subject) classes 3 times a week and will see module classes utilized to nurture basic English language skills.

In addition, there is a requirement to specifically utilize class teachers with good English teaching skills, as well as specialized course teachers. The latter reference is not clear however: who these teachers are, what skills they (should) have, and the language of instruction is not specified. Two other stipulations support the efforts toward globalisation:

- firstly, to establish ‘coherent learning achievement targets’ (MEXT, 2016) for English throughout the school system, and
- secondly, to enrich educational content in relation to nurturing the individual sense of Japanese identity (a focus on traditional culture, history and so forth) (MEXT, 2016).

These specifications, broad as they might seem, are laudable in the sense that the ministry is attempting to bring English education coherently and systematically into mainstream education from a much earlier age than before. It is further interesting – if somewhat paradoxical – to note that under the same heading a stipulation is made *to nurture an individual sense of Japanese identity*. In the absence of further qualification, it begs the question how these requirements – which clearly incorporates and draws to the fore a *cultural* component – should be interpreted by teachers in relation to the teaching of English.

Teachers typically mediate the academic *and* personal development of students, and thus occupy arguably the single most significant position as agents of transformation in the learning process. It is therefore worth considering a few broader observations here as it has bearing on teacher reflection and practice in curriculum design and lesson planning. As the MEXT proposal states, the systematic introduction of English in primary schools is an effort towards creating some linguistic foundation for young learners. This is the most apparent goal, and given the overarching goal towards ‘globalisation’, it would seem that the desire here is to lay the foundation for the instrumental purpose of English as a

Lingua Franca (ELF), i.e. taking into account that most employers (and governments) now see language learning – in particular English – as one of the essential skills required in international trade (MEXT, 2011). It is also seen, at least in the current global dispensation, as one of the skills that underpins intercultural competence, which usually refers to the ability of an individual to manage the interconnectedness of diversity (Spitzberg & Changnon, 2009, p. 4).

Research has further shown that globally, parents see the acquisition of languages as an important investment in their children that endows them with social and cultural capital that will carry forward to generations following (Byram, 2008, p. 77). The cultural coding inherent in all languages is nevertheless a problematizing feature that continues to be investigated in education, and specifically in the overlapping domains of intercultural and language studies. (Byram, 2009, p. 321-2). A topic at the interface between education and technological advancement, namely the role of English as a lingua franca (ELF), has seen much debate as modern knowledge economies compete for skilled workers (Roux, 2014; Tsuda, 2008; Narkunas, 2005; Kachru, 1996). Further to this, Byram (2008) draws attention to the ‘oft-noted tension’ (p. 77) between language learning for instrumental purposes (i.e., part of the investment in societies’ human resources), *vis-à-vis* the educational purposes of language teaching in respect of intercultural learning. In particular, he points out that language learning that lacks a cultural dimension holds particular dangers. If this learning, for instance, is simply an encoding of a learner’s world ‘through some assumed simple relationship’ between their own and the foreign language, it is unlikely that they will have the ‘experience of otherness’ that should be fundamentally part of language learning at school (Byram, 2008, p. 77-8).

The cultural dimensions of English education appear to remain in the background of the MEXT reforms however. This is perhaps due to the pressures of governmental (and economic) targets in terms of testing and assessment, which has partially influenced the English education industry in Japan to focus more on receptive literacy as opposed to communicative competence. Byram (2009, p.17) also observes that all teachers of language are in some way underprepared, as the emphasis in education has historically been occupied with technical matters, such as theories of learning, content choices, delivery of material and assessment. Thus, despite much effort and cost, English education in Japan still do not imbue learners with the desired communicative skill that is often evident in other (Asian) countries (The Japan Times, 2015). It remains therefore quite pertinent, given this background, to seriously consider if and how culture can be taught, and how exactly it flows through language, since these are the types of questions that educators are confronted with in teaching English as a foreign language.

Eventually, it is the cumulative experience of learning about difference that sees an individual reaching the flexibility of intercultural competence: the ability to relate to and with people from vastly different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009, p. 4). This type of flexibility has in recent years also been referred to as *cultural intelligence (CQ)* (Early & Ang, 2003). Turning back to the school years then, how is this cultural learning to be acquired? And, what is the role of teachers in this? As Byram (2008, p. 83) points out, language teaching in primary schools that takes cultural learning into account, presupposes that teachers themselves will have acquired intercultural communicative competence to some degree. Worryingly however, Mahon & Cushner, in *The Sage Handbook of Intercultural Competence* (2009) report that most educational institutions worldwide still neglect intercultural training as a central feature in supporting their respective organizational missions, citing

‘a surprising disparity between teachers, teacher education students, and the children they are preparing to teach, with young people demonstrating higher levels of intercultural sensitivity than their teachers’ (p. 309).

Teachers, who face the same intercultural complexity of modern life as their students, therefore need to ask themselves anew: *what* should be taught, and *how* will it nurture cultural intelligence (CQ)? These questions forefront not only the importance of addressing the scope and content of teacher education, but pointedly, the *cultural intelligence of teachers*, who are tasked with the transmission of the cultural knowledge that inevitably accompanies language instruction. With the vision of MEXT’s English framework for Japanese primary schools in mind, a very brief description of what might be required in the education of primary school teachers, at least from a European perspective, is offered here for contrastive purposes. Byram (2008, p. 83-5) observes that for teachers to make informed and instructive decisions about when and how to nurture intercultural competence in their learners, they need a ‘rich personal experience’ of intercultural learning, as well as a thorough knowledge of social and developmental psychology. In his model of intercultural competence, he characterizes an individual with high levels of competence, as someone who is able to negotiate an identity in the space within and across cultures. Particular skills or abilities that enable and support intercultural competence is described as interpreting or relating, knowledge, discovery and interaction skills, critical cultural awareness and flexible attitudes toward otherness (Spitzberg & Chagnon, 2009, p. 17).

As for the teacher training of primary school teachers, Byram (2008, p. 84-5) remarks that the abovementioned abilities are unlikely to be acquired through in-service training alone, but would also need the benefit of initial university studies in this area. He continues that besides courses in higher education, primary school teachers tasked with language instruction would further benefit from an obligatory year of ‘fieldwork’ – an immersion experience in another country, such as is common for

teachers in training in the British education system. This would go a long way in creating ‘primary school language experts’ who have managed to integrate the language and culture of other countries, as Felberbauer & Heindler (1995) argue. Byram (2008) continues by referring to the ‘Prague model of Teacher Education’ (Doye, 1999), that proposes the qualification of specialist primary school teachers of language along the following lines:

- a) *education* – focused on the place of primary education in education systems as a whole, and the principles of integration of language and intercultural education;
- b) *foreign language pedagogy* – dealing with the aims, methods and materials; this is the central element in the model;
- c) *linguistic and cultural studies* – in which students learn theory of language and theory of culture;
- d) *psychology* – including developmental and social psychology, theory of learning and psycholinguistics.

The links between language teaching and intercultural competence are clearly important considerations in teacher training and the future design of teacher training courses. Typically, governments use in-service training to effect large-scale policy changes and address the aforesaid issues; however, given the large cadres of current teachers in existence, all with varying levels of experience, a number of rather serious and complicated issues are raised. How indeed can the English language ability and intercultural competence of primary school teachers be addressed across a national system of education? The English education reform envisioned by MEXT attends to some of these questions by outlining what is referred to as ‘the construction of necessary frameworks for new English education’. These proposed frameworks focus on teachers, external staff and the development of teaching materials. Four targets are identified in the reform:

- a) *Empower teachers in elementary school*: create measures for additional posting and training of English education promotion leaders; improve teaching skills of specialized English course teachers and elementary school class teachers; develop and provide audio teaching materials for training; improve teacher training and employment.
- b) *Empower teachers in lower and upper secondary school*: nurture English education promotion leaders in these schools; improve teaching skills of English subject teachers; utilize external exams to periodically inspect the English achievement levels of teachers (setting achievement standards for performance on tests such as EIKEN, TOEFL iBT).

- c) *Promote the utilization of external staff*: expand placement, strengthen and enrich the assistant language teachers (ALT's); promote the use of community members.
- d) *Develop guidance teaching materials*: prepare materials for early implementation; develop and prepare information and communication technology (ICT) teaching materials for module classes.

Summarizing very shortly, the tasks ahead for the elementary school teacher within the English education reform plan is a formidable orchestration of priorities: to prepare children for globalisation through first leading English language activity classes, and later through English as subject classes, whilst remaining cognizant of, and fostering, their learner's sense of Japanese identity. Simultaneously, they are also requested to improve their own teaching skills and English language ability, while employing new teaching materials and utilizing external staff to assist in the teaching process. Given these policy expectations as background, it seems vital to add the voice of current teachers: What skills, abilities and personal life experience do they have that can support the new responsibilities expected from them? What are their attitudes and expectations regarding teaching English and the accompanying cultural dimensions? What experiences and situational factors in teachers' working lives might mediate the success of this reform? The remainder of this paper presents and discusses some of the capacities, questions and perceptions among Japanese school teachers who participated in the survey and workshop.

3. The study

3.1 Background and methods

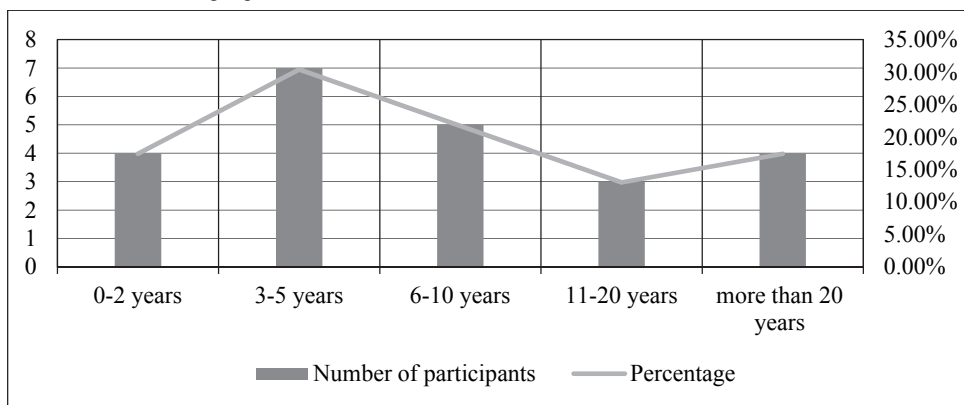
Lecturers in the Organisation for General Education (OGE) at Saga University received a request from the prefectural board of education for a training workshop, to be conducted in English, for elementary school teachers. In the absence of specific guidelines, it was decided to conduct a needs analysis among the participants in order to gain a sense of teachers' training needs regarding English teaching and intercultural awareness, perceptions involving the proposed English reforms and the accompanying policy implementation, as well as to explore future avenues for ongoing teacher education and research. A bilingual (English/Japanese) survey, using Google online forms, was sent to all participants before the workshop. Although participation was required by the local board of education, personal information was not collected during the survey and participation in future research activities was invited on a voluntary basis.

3.2 Results and discussion

A total of 23 teachers responded to the survey and the same number also participated in the workshop, conducted over two days in late December. The gender ratio was fairly balanced, with 13 women (56.5%), and 10 men (43.5%) taking part.

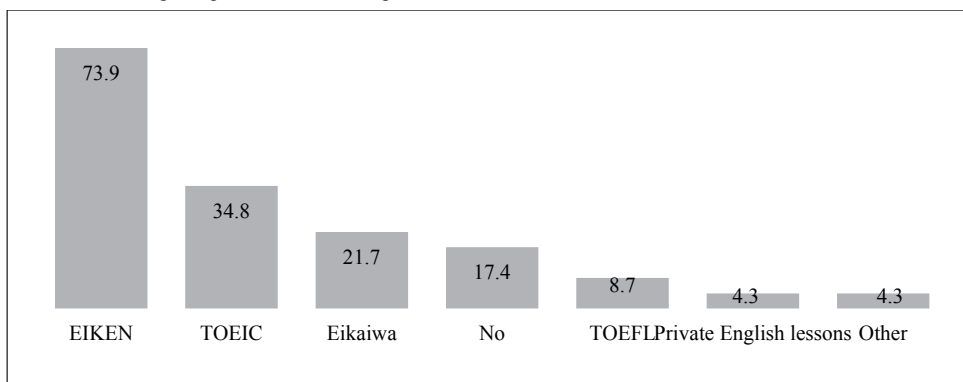
3.2.1 **Teaching experience:** Table 1 presents the years of teaching experience spread across the group of participants. The majority of teachers (almost a third) had been teaching for 3-5 years, while a sizeable proportion (almost 22%) had been teaching for 6-10 years. It is notable therefore that more than half of the participants could be considered as having 3 or more years of teaching experience.

Table 1: Years of teaching experience



3.2.2 **Formal English qualifications:** Teachers in this group qualified before most of the recent English reforms in the education sector. They can therefore be expected to have typically studied 6 years of English (starting in junior high school). Allowing for individual variation and personal study interest, the survey sought to understand what kind of English language exposure the participants had outside of the formal schooling experience. The following results were in evidence: 73.9% had taken the EIKEN test (Test in Practical English Proficiency), Japan’s most widely used English language testing program, while 34.8% had TOEIC experience. As should be clear from these results, teachers’ formal English language experience were thus strongly influenced by testing, with only 21.7% of the participants undertaking lessons at ‘Eikaiwa’ or English language schools (usually self-funded). It could be said therefore that teachers in this group had very limited exposure and/or experience with English in the communicative sense, as one would expect to need for everyday use.

Table 2: Formal English qualifications and experience



3.2.3 ***Intercultural orientation and experience:*** The survey further explored teachers' attitudes, experience and interest regarding English in foreign contexts through travelling abroad, and whether they thought that this was in any way linked to their own intercultural learning, or likewise important for their learners' education in this area. In other words, an attempt was made here to draw on the notion of *intercultural competence (IC)*, also referred to as *cultural intelligence (CQ)*. Please refer to tables 3 and 4 below for the results. As for an interest in travelling abroad, it appears all participants expressed an interest, although almost a third (30.4%), have never had the opportunity, and 65.2% have travelled abroad for less than a month. Only one teacher appears to have travelled (and lived) abroad for more than a month. There is thus a demonstrated interest in travelling abroad among all the participants, although it would be important to establish the motivation for this interest before making any assumptions about its self-perceived educational benefit to the person in question.

Table 3: Teachers who have travelled abroad

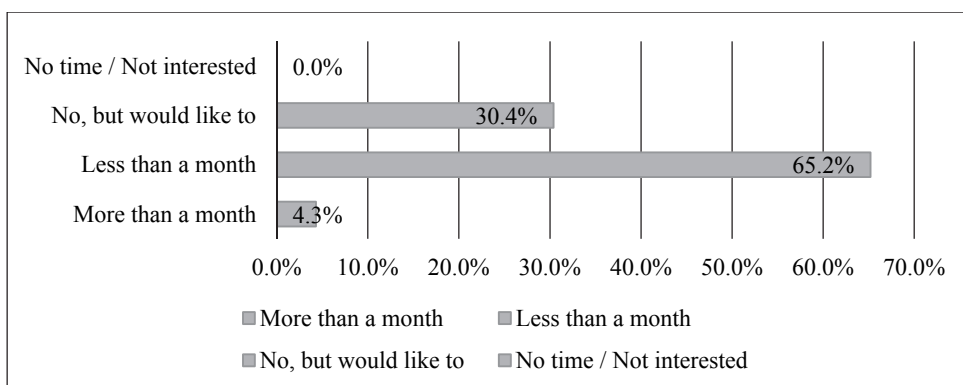
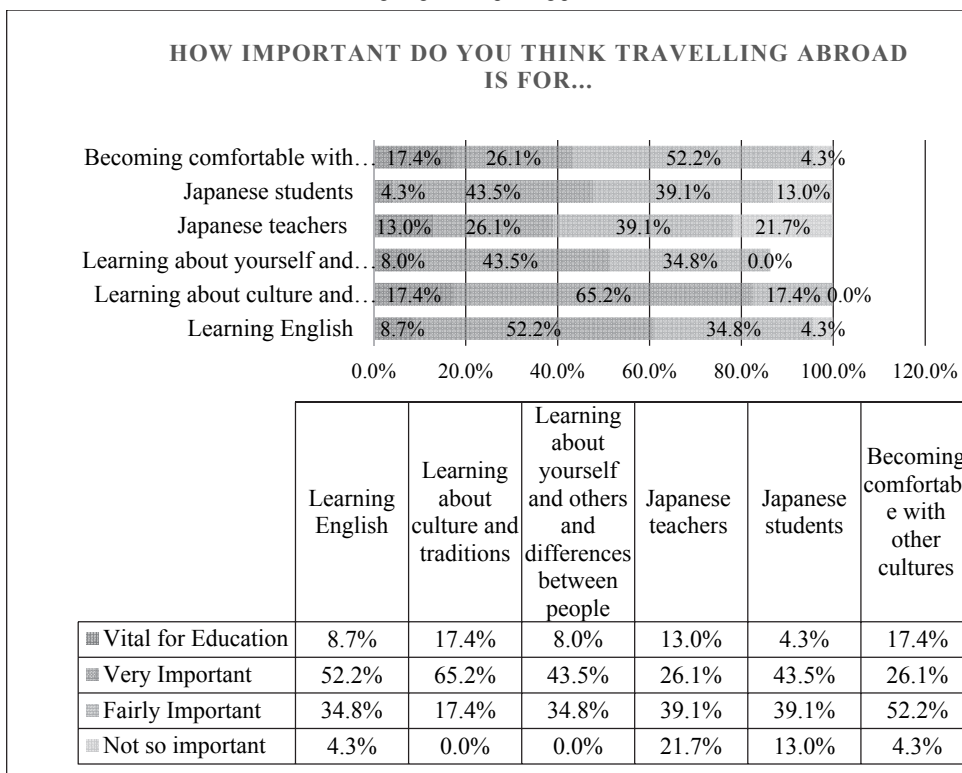


Table 4: Intercultural orientation and Learning English: Exploring possible connections

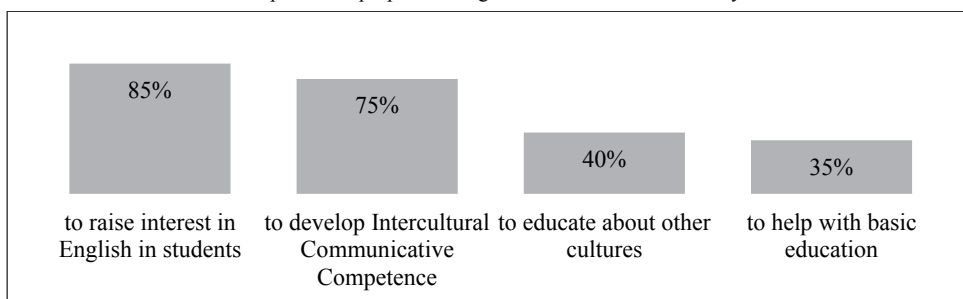


A question regarding the perceived usefulness of English in teachers' everyday life yielded interesting and very relevant information: only 2% indicated that it was necessary, whereas 50% indicated that it *might* be useful in the future, and 45% said that it was sometimes useful. A further 20% indicated that it is a 'hobby' for them. The minority of teachers drew a direct link between travelling abroad, its connection to education and its hypothesized link to developing intercultural openness or competence, as seen in the rather low response count to the 'vital for education' option. It is however notable that by far the majority of teachers thought that it is 'fairly or very important' to travel in order to support the development of English learning. It is notably interesting that a larger proportion of teachers (43.5%) value this type of learning (very important) as more valuable for their students than for themselves (26.1%). Is it possible that they don't connect their own learning or experience in this regard as important in terms of having an impact on their classroom and students? This could be followed up in a qualitative enquiry, but it is worth speculating about in view of the other findings, which do seem to indicate a general openness toward the notion of an experience abroad for the purposes of learning. The connection made to English learning however, appears to be a valid line of

enquiry and the response pattern, which placed the majority of responses in the ‘fairly important – very important’ categories, indicate that language (English) study and intercultural learning are connected in teachers’ minds when it comes to student education.

3.2.4 English instruction at Elementary schools: Teachers’ views on the perceived purpose of English instruction are as follows: 85% felt that the main purpose was to raise interest in English in students; 75% felt that it was important for assisting the development of intercultural competence; 40% felt it helped to educate about other cultures, and 35% felt the purpose was to help with basic education (Table 5). Teachers are clearly interested in and appear aware of the fact that English education has advantages for their students in linguistic terms, and, presumably also in cultural application terms. It therefore seems reasonable to conclude, given the fairly high support the first two notions garnered, that teachers agree with the purpose of raising an interest in English for children, and helping them to develop intercultural communicative competence (through English instruction). If teacher support and willingness to these ideas are in evidence, what other potential hurdles could hamper reformist thinking?

Table 5: Teachers’ views on the perceived purpose of English instruction in Elementary schools

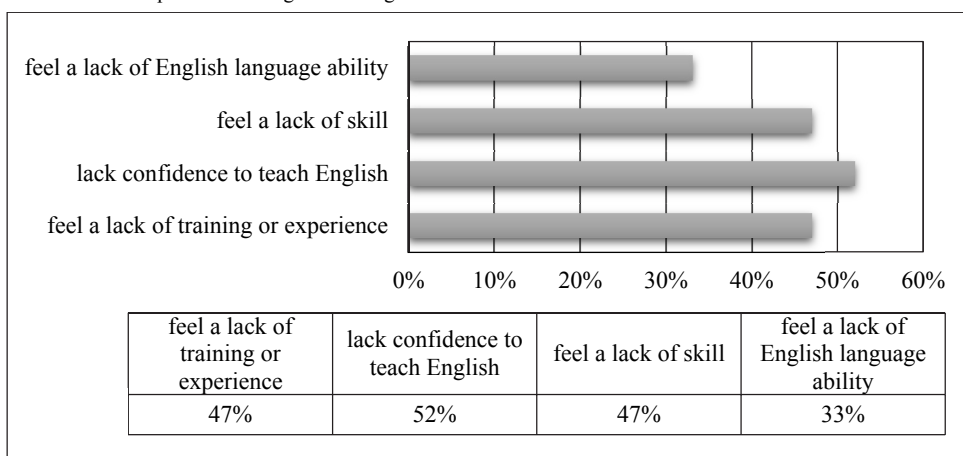


Survey data further reveals that only one school (of the five schools represented) had an organised English activity for the lower grades, that is, outside of the required curriculum for grades 5 and 6. If this is correct, it would seem that the proposed reforms had not yet taken place at the lower levels. A surprising 50% of respondents said that there are English-speaking parents at their school(s), which could be an important community resource for the school if mobilized in some or other form, either through the PTA, or direct requests from the board of education. English education support and materials appear to be fairly easily available and, ranked in the order of preferred use, were reported as follows: 90% of teachers use the prescribed textbook, 70% rely on the ALT to help with materials; 60% use self-made materials; 40% use the internet to get materials and a further 25% rely on other materials from education

companies. Among the goals for the English reform, it is aimed to provide teachers with more ‘in-hand’ class materials and to strengthen and expand support frameworks in terms of expert teachers and ALT’s.

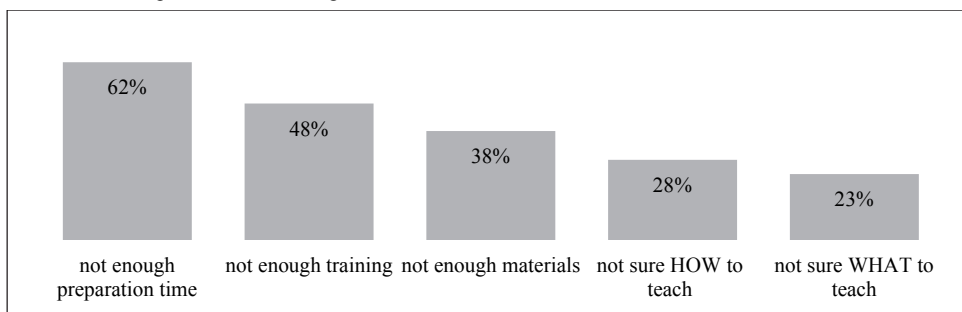
3.2.4 **Teachers’ personal feelings about English:** Perhaps some of the most revealing results from this survey are the personal feelings teachers expressed – here presented and ranked in terms of the degree of deficit they feel in this area (Table 6). Self-perceived ability and real ability or skill are often two different things and it seems, given the fairly high percentages reported here (recall that the majority of teachers in this survey have 3 or more years of experience), that this might be a critical area to explore in further detail. In the comments section of the survey, a large number of participants expressed concern and anxiety related to the language of instruction at the workshop –which was to be in English – which is a further indication regarding their feelings on the matter. As testimony to their willingness however, participants nevertheless all brought some kind of classroom activity to share during the workshop, which, according to the workshop presenter, they all presented to the group either in English or Japanese. It seems however, that these issues, namely a self-perceived lack of training/experience, lack of confidence, lack of skill and a lack of English language ability are key elements in understanding teacher’s anxiety and possible resistance in relation to the proposed reforms. In this group one-third to a half of teachers had these emotions in common, suggesting some serious considerations for future training and development.

Table 6: Teachers’ personal feelings about English



3.2.5 **Teachers' professional challenges:** Closely tied to self-perceived notions of personal competence and efficacy, are people's ideas about how their environment and profession allow or enable them to feel equipped and effective in their job. This is a rather complex area where teacher effort, knowledge and skill overlap with institutional support and organisation, as well as opportunities for training and development. The survey aimed to address at least a few of these themes in trying to understand what kind of issues teachers face in their daily professional life, with a view to the implementation of the proposed reforms. Table 7 below presents the findings in this area, and read together with the previous comments (3.2.4), provide further support for the idea that personal and professional challenges for this group of participants come very close to explaining potential hindrances in policy enactment for the English education reform. Very significant is that almost two-thirds (62%) of teachers felt a lack of time for preparation during the school day, an issue that could be remedied either through employing additional personnel or perhaps reorganizing work-schedules. Almost half (48%) of teachers expressed a need for more training, again reiterating earlier observations.

Table 7: Teachers' professional challenges



4. Conclusion and recommendations

Broadly speaking, findings from the survey can be summarised in two main points: firstly, that a general openness toward English education and its role in the development of intercultural communicative competence exist in the minds of elementary school teachers. This is a very heartening finding in the light of a concern raised in recent years, namely a trend of 'looking inward' (MEXT, 2011) among Japanese youth. Among teachers in this survey, there is certainly an openness to internationalising education through English – and indirectly, intercultural learning. Secondly, and acting as a potential hindrance to successful implementation of the envisaged English reforms, are the self-perceived inadequacies that teachers harbour in respect of their own English ability, which is potentially interacting negatively with their sense of professional efficacy in delivering English lessons. The need for further

training and skill development in this area was a clear theme that emerged from the needs assessment and it is with this aim in mind that the following recommendations are offered.

Training needs and recommendations

- Improve teachers' English language ability: given the goals of the English education reform, communicative skill (as opposed to receptive skills) are needed most;
- Specific teacher training to support English teaching: specific pedagogy and methods to support the 4-skills development in language and communicative learning (games, songs, practical activities to expand on the textbook);
- Make educational materials plentiful and easily accessible: colour pictures, flashcards, posters, etc., either available in classrooms, or easily accessible from online repositories;
- Technological support: providing older, more experienced teachers with opportunities for training in web based technology; make classrooms more technologically equipped;
- Feedback of findings to university training courses for future training of teachers;
- Support and encouragement for teachers-in-training to study abroad or visit foreign countries for educational purposes;
- Ideas and support for utilizing skills and people currently available in schools' immediate surroundings: parents with multilingual skills, specialist teachers or community members with experience, expand assistant language teacher (ALT) visits, special English activities to engage local and/or business community, and so forth.

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