

The Sooner, the Better for English Education in Japan?: A Case Study on English Education at a Private School in the Tokyo Metropolitan area

Satoshi Kurokawa

Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, the University of Tokyo

This paper compares English proficiency levels between students who started English education in the first grade (the elementary one [E1] group) and those that started in the fifth grade (the elementary five [E5] group) at a private school in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The study uses a C-test and the participants' pass rate in English proficiency tests, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages A2 level. The results showed that there were no significant differences in the English proficiency levels between the E1 and E5 groups. The pass rate for A2 level tests revealed that a greater number of E5 group members passed the tests compared to those from the E1 group. In conclusion, the findings showed that in the final year of high school, the E5 group showed more improvement in their English proficiency than the E1 group in terms of the C-test and English proficiency tests.

2020年度より、小学3年生から「外国語活動」が始まり、小学校5年生から「英語」が必修科目となる。今後もより早期の英語教育が小学校のカリキュラムに導入されることが予想される。そこで本研究では、小学1年生から英語学習経験がある高校3年生と(早期学習群)、現在の英語教育の標準開始時期である小学5年生から英語学習経験がある高校3年生(通常学習群)の英語力に差異があるかどうかを検証した。本研究結果では、高校3年生の時点で早期学習群は、通常学習群と比べてC-testの点数には有意差はなかった($t(85) = -1.581, p > .01$)。また、英検取得の割合は通常学習群の方が高かった(通常学習群 = 86%: 早期学習群 = 56%)。それゆえ、早く英語学習を始めたとしても、高校3年生の段階では差はなくなるということが示唆された。

Keywords: Early English Education, Standardized Test, C-test, EFL Countries,

1. Introduction

The need to investigate the effect of an early English education has recently become a major focus in countries where English is commonly taught as a foreign language (EFL) (Cha, 2006). For example, South Korea and China have started introducing English education into the early grades of school (Jung & Norton, 2002). South Korea started introducing English education into the third grade in 1997 (Kim, 2011), while China started it in the third grade in 2001 (Hu, 2002). Following these East Asian countries' English educational policies, elementary English classes were introduced into Japan in

*Email: skurokawa0521ut@gmail.com

2010.

If it is better for EFL students to begin English language education sooner rather than later, it should be introduced into the earlier grades at schools. This theory was investigated by researchers as they discussed the effect of an early English education in East Asia (Jung & Norton, 2002; Butler, 2007; Hu, 2009; Kim, 2011).

However, few researchers have indicated that an early English education contributes to improving students' English proficiency when they become adults. Further, little is known about whether those who studied English earlier in their life achieved higher English proficiency than those who started later. Therefore, only a few studies have compared students who began learning English in a later grade (as designated in the curriculum of the country) with those who started from the earliest school grade (i.e., the first grade).

Therefore, it is worth investigating this issue in the Japanese context because many private schools that cover elementary to senior high school grades have already started offering English education in the first grade, whereas public schools only offer it from the fifth grade. If both types of students enter a school that has both junior high and high school levels, going through the same curriculum, their English proficiency could be compared using their learning experience as a basis for a case study.

The results could be valuable not just in the private high schools that are putting efforts into early English education in Japan but also in other East Asian countries aiming to implement English education from an earlier grade. Therefore, this paper addresses the following research question (RQ):

RQ: Do Japanese EFL students who started their English education in the first grade have a higher English proficiency when they are in the final year of high school than students who started English education in the fifth grade in the Tokyo metropolitan area?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Major Changes in English Education at Elementary Schools in Japan

Erikawa (2008) said that many Japanese private elementary schools, particularly the parochial schools, have already been teaching English since the Meiji period (1868–1912). However, public elementary schools did not officially teach English because the curriculum issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), which regulated education in Japan, did not prescribe the implementation of an English education.

According to Erikawa (1996), two public elementary schools were designated in 1992 as pilot schools for English education. Erikawa further stated that such pilot elementary schools were established in every prefecture in 1996. In 2003, MEXT announced the *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities* (also known as the 2003 Action Plan). According to this Action Plan (2003), Japanese people were urged to acquire English communication skills to enable them to participate in international activities. This

plan also stipulated that when Japanese students graduated from high school, they should have passed the Eiken test, a well-known standardized English proficiency test in Japan, at the pre-2 or 2 level. These grades are equivalent to the A2 and B1 proficiency levels of the Common European Framework for Reference (CEFR).

In response to the Action Plan (2003), MEXT (2006) reported that it was necessary to enhance English education at the elementary school level. Curricula and instructional guidelines were revised in 2011, and public elementary schools started what MEXT described as “foreign language activities.” Although this form of English instruction started from the fifth grade and the class was taught once a week, it was nonetheless the first time that a foreign language was officially taught at public elementary schools in Japan.

Butler (2007, 2015) stated that the reason for introducing English education in earlier stages was due to internationalization or *Kokusaika* (国際化). Due to *Kokusaika*, the Japanese students were prompted to communicate in English and MEXT aimed to reduce the students’ anxiety in speaking to foreigners. Therefore, English classes were offered in the form of “foreign language activities,” which aimed to familiarize students with the notion of foreign language before they began learning English as a formal subject in the first grade of junior high school.

In 2020, MEXT announced that foreign language activities would start in the third grade, and English classes are to be introduced as a formal subject in the fifth grade in Japanese public elementary schools (Lightbrown & Spada, 2019). The foreign language activities, in effect, taught English through communicative activities related to the daily lives of the students, and these activities were not graded on report cards because they were regarded as being informal. However, when the curricula and instructional guidelines are revised in 2020, the foreign language activities will begin in the third grade, and when students progress to the fifth grade, English will be offered as a formal class and will be graded on their report cards.

2.2 Research Following the Implementation of English Classes at the Elementary Schools

After the start of English education in elementary schools was announced, researchers examined the issue of English education in Japanese elementary schools from several different perspectives. Toyonaga and Sudo (2017) divided the previous research into two categories: one category included research focused on the improvement of the students’ affective attitudes toward English, while the other encompassed research focused on the improvement of students’ English proficiency. Undoubtedly, both types of research are important. However, because the Action Plan (2003) set certain criteria regarding English proficiency for high school students, the present research focused on improving students’ English proficiency.

Empirical research has been documented regarding improving students’ English proficiency (Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children [JASTEC], 1987; Muñoz, 2006; Hasegawa, 2013). JASTEC (1987) examined the effect of English classes in private elementary schools. JASTEC showed that the speaking ability of the participants who had begun to learn English from the elementary school level (experienced group) had a higher English language proficiency than those who started

learning English in the first year of junior high school (non-experienced group). However, there were no significant differences between the two groups in terms of other skills, such as listening, reading, and writing.

After the Action Plan (2003) was announced, Hasegawa (2013) divided the participants in his study into three types based on the age they started their English education to compare listening proficiency. The participants showed no significant difference in their listening proficiencies among their starting ages. Muñoz (2006) also said that in some EFL situation studies, students who started late tended to catch up with the early starters.

As noted, the results of previous studies regarding the effect of an early English education may differ, one of the reasons being that the participants were not obtained by random sampling.

Against the background of previous studies on improvement in English proficiency levels, social statistics offer a useful method for determining the effect of early English education in Japan because these social statistics are based on social survey methodology and, therefore, use valid sampling, which is difficult to achieve in most second language acquisition research. It can also allow for an investigation into the effect of early English education in Japan. The social statistics were analyzed to investigate the effect of English education at an elementary school (Terasawa, 2018). Using an open data archive, Terasawa examined the English proficiency of the experienced and non-experienced groups when students reached the second year in junior high school. The results showed that the proficiency of the experienced group was slightly higher than that of the non-experienced group. Terasawa proposed that English education at elementary school improved students' English proficiency.

However, holistic social surveys require substantial funding. Therefore, a researcher may find it difficult to obtain big data without assistance. Moreover, the data available for the current study was limited to existing social surveys because it was difficult to obtain relevant data before the introduction of an early English education at elementary schools. As no social surveys were available when the author wrote this paper, it would not have been possible to utilize such data to address the RQ of the present study. If English education is introduced into the first grade in the future, it may be worth relating the results of the present study to social statistical data after conducting the social surveys.

2.3 Research Gaps

To sum up the previous research, JASTEC (1987) indicated that when students were in the second year of the private high school, the oral ability of the experienced group had improved more than that of the non-experienced group. Terasawa (2018) stated that when the students were in the second year of junior high school, the experienced group showed more improvement in their holistic English ability than the non-experienced group. However, neither of these studies investigated the proficiency of students who were in the third year of high school. Moreover, these two studies did not investigate students who took English classes in the first grade. Consequently, the present study compared students who started English education in the first grade with students who started English education in the fifth grade.

3. Method

To answer the RQ, the most effective way to conduct this research would have been to ask all participants to take a standardized English proficiency test (i.e., TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC) at the same time. However, considering the cost of such an experiment, this was not a feasible option.

Therefore, this paper conducted two alternative experiments. One experiment was to administer a test to compare the participants' English proficiency, while the other was to compare the participants' pass rate in standardized English proficiency tests. In the former experiment, it was essential to avoid any possible testing bias. For example, if the tasks were too familiar to the participants, every participant would be able to achieve a high score, and therefore, it would prove difficult to obtain a fair measure of any significant difference based on their proficiency (Nikolov & Szabó, 2011). Therefore, a C-test was used as the participants in this study had rarely encountered this type of test.

The latter experiment investigated the extent to which an early English education affected students' achievement in standardized English proficiency tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC). Using these two different methods of comparison, this paper investigates the effect of an early English education in elementary schools in Japan when students are in the third year of high school. The characteristics of participants and material information are explained in the next section.

3.1 Participants

Overall, 145 high school students participated in this study in June 2018. The author taught all participants as a trainee teacher for three weeks in May 2016 when the participants were in the first grade of high school. During the time of the study, all participants were in the third year of high school. The data was collected from a private high school that is located in the Tokyo metropolitan area and includes elementary, middle, and high school levels. Students are required to pass moderately competitive entrance examinations to enter both the elementary and junior high school levels. Except for those who entered at the high school level, all students are required to take the same curriculum in English education after they enter junior high school.

Further, the students who meet the criteria set by the leading private universities in Tokyo may be admitted to those universities without taking the entrance examinations. These criteria include passing a standardized English proficiency test, such as the Eiken Grade 2, administered by Nihon Eigo Kentei Kyokai (日本英語検定協会), or the Eiken Foundation of Japan (formerly the Society for Testing English Proficiency, Inc.). Approximately 90% of the students plan to go to a private university, and they take the Eiken Grade 2 test or equivalent before they graduate from this high school. The school aimed to follow the criteria of the Action Plan (2003). Moreover, to facilitate the passing of the Eiken Grade 2 level tests, all students had to take GTEC for students every year and TOEIC Reading and Listening tests during the third grade of high school.

Approximately 84% of the participants in this study had already passed some form of English proficiency test. Therefore, it was possible to compare the groups in terms of

their pass rate in those English proficiency tests.

The English education at this school focused on communicative language teaching, and full-time and part-time native English-speaking teachers taught the participants twice a week, whereas full-time Japanese teachers of English taught three times a week. Most students did not prepare for the entrance examinations because 90% of them planned to enter a private university without taking the university entrance examinations. Therefore, few students went to cram schools to prepare for the examinations; most of the teaching methods and the students' learning strategies were barely influenced by the Japanese university entrance examinations.

All the information about the participants was collected from the full-time English teacher at the high school.

3.1.1 Participant Grouping

To compare the effect of the starting age of an English education in elementary school fairly, those participants who had studied abroad in English-speaking countries (N = 58) or who had entered at the high school level (N = 11) were excluded from the number of participants because those participants had not gone through the same curriculum so that their English proficiency could not be compared based on their learning experience.

This study compared two groups. One group was comprised of participants who started learning English in the first grade (i.e., at the age of 7) in an affiliated private elementary school that emphasized English education. For convenience, this group will be referred to as the elementary one (E1) group (N = 31). The other group was comprised of participants who had started learning English in the fifth grade (i.e., at the age of 11), and this group will be referred to as the elementary five (E5) group (N = 56). The E1 group had taken English classes once a week at their private school since the first grade. However, the E5 group was from public elementary schools and had started English classes in the fifth grade. In short, the difference between the two groups was the age at which they started their English education in elementary school, as well as the fact that while the E1 group had studied at a private elementary school, the E5 group had studied at public elementary schools.

As mentioned above, because the participants differed from the ordinary students at a Japanese high school, this study's findings cannot be generalized to other contexts or countries because it is context-dependent. At best, the findings can provide a source of comparison and illustrate the complexity of assessing outcomes from educational innovation.

3.2 C-test

The C-test is a variation of the cloze test. In a cloze test, words are deleted from a reading passage at intervals of three to seven words, and participants fill in the blanks. Conversely, in the C-test, the second half of every second word in a reading passage is deleted, beginning with the second word of the second sentence. While many cloze tests have one or two reading passages and comprise 20 or more blanks, C-tests have four or five passages and comprise 100 blanks (Dörnyei & Katona, 1992). The text is comprised of four passages and each passage has 25 blanks. That means that the vocabulary and

sentences of the text gradually become difficult (Nishida, 1988). According to Nishida (1988), both tests measure overall English proficiency, but the C-test is less affected by the designated sentences. In addition, Dörnyei and Katona (1992) claim that the C-test measures general language proficiency more effectively than the cloze test. And, as mentioned above, the C-test avoids affecting task familiarity bias. Allen and Katayama (2016) used the C-test as a placement test for participants in their study. For these reasons, this study used the C-test as a means of measuring general English proficiency. The test was made by following the rules discussed in Dörnyei and Katona (1992) and Nishida (1988). The first passage of the C-test used in this study is shown in Appendix 1.

Before the administration of the C-test, the English teacher at the participants' high school confirmed that this kind of task had never been put on the students' term-end examinations. Therefore, the testing bias that occurs from familiarity with the task was not an issue in this study.

3.3 English Proficiency Tests

As mentioned in 3.1, participants who planned to enter a private university without taking the entrance examinations were required to pass the Eiken Grade 2 or equivalent English proficiency tests. Many participants in this study had already passed several English proficiency tests as designated by the admissions offices of private universities. Therefore, to compare the English proficiency of the E1 and E5 group, the participants were asked to provide the names of the English proficiency tests that they had already taken. According to the Action Plan (2003), Japanese students need to pass the Eiken Pre-2 level proficiency test before graduating from high school. In this study, the participants who had passed the Eiken Pre-2 tests were considered to be successful English learners, and the pass rate percentage of the Eiken Pre-2 was calculated for each group respectively. However, some participants had taken a different English proficiency test, such as TOEFL, GTEC for students, or TOEIC, in which case this study referred to the CEFR to assess whether the scores on other proficiency tests were compatible with the Eiken Pre-2 or whether the tests met the CEFR A2 level of proficiency.

4. Results

4.1 Score Comparison of the C-test

The p -value for this study was set as $p > .05$ based on other research in the field of second language acquisition. The t-test was used to compare the score in the C-test.

The t-tests indicated that there were no significant differences in the C-test scores between the E1 and E5 groups ($t(85) = -1.58, p > 0.1$). The descriptive data is shown in Table 1. The E5 group scored 50 points on average, while the E1 group scored 44 points on average. Thus, there was no significant difference between the E1 group who started English education during the first grade and the E5 group who started English education during the fifth grade, though the score of the E5 group was slightly higher than that of the E1 group ($d = 0.35$).

Table 1 Scores in the C-test

	E1 group	E5 group
The number of participants	31	56
Mean	44	50
Standard deviation	13	15.5

4.2 Comparison of Scores in English Proficiency Tests

Before comparing the pass rate in the English proficiency tests, this study investigated how many participants had previously passed English proficiency tests.

Table 2 shows the pass rate of each group in the English proficiency tests. While 86% (48 out of 56) of the E1 group passed the A2 level test, 65% (20 out of 31) of the E5 group passed the A2 level tests. This was contrary to expectations, as the E5 group was more likely to pass the A2 test than the E1 group.

Table 2 Percentage Pass Rate for the E1 and E5 groups

	E1 group	E5 group
Passed	65%	86%
Did not pass	35%	14%
Total	100%	100%

5. Discussion

Although this study has limitations, the findings may lead to a deeper discussion in the area of earlier English education as a case study.

This study's findings did not support the findings in the study conducted by JASTEC (1987). JASTEC claimed that when both groups were in the second year of high school, participants who experienced English education at elementary school had a more proficient speaking ability than the non-experienced group. However, there were no significant differences between the groups in terms of reading, listening, and writing skills. The present study did not investigate the four language skills separately. Given the pass rate in the certifications of English proficiency tests between the E1 and E5 groups, the findings revealed that compared to the E5 group, the E1 group who had started English education in the first grade had no advantage in language proficiency when they reached the final year of high school.

The present study examined the findings of Terasawa's study (2018), which was a sociological study on the effect of English education at elementary school. Terasawa (2018) posited that participants who started English education earlier attained slightly higher proficiency than those who started English education in the regular year. However,

the striking difference between the present study and Terasawa's study was that the present study investigated the effect of early English education in terms of the C-test score and English proficiency tests. Terasawa compared subjects who had started studying English in elementary school with others who did not study English in elementary school. However, the present study compared the E1 group and the E5 group. Terasawa's study conducted a survey when the participants were in the second year of junior high school, whereas the present study conducted a survey when the participants were in the final year of high school. It should be noted that while there was a significant difference between the groups in the second year of junior high regarding their age when they started their English education, there were no significant differences between them when they were in the final year of high school. Therefore, even if the participants who started English education earlier attained better English proficiency in the second year of junior high than those who started English education in the regular year, the gap in English proficiency may be non-existent by the time they start the final year of high school.

6. Limitations

The present study has three major limitations. First, the data was only collected from one high school, which is a private high school located in the Tokyo metropolitan area. The results from this data should not be generalized carelessly because the data did not encompass other schools or cover several regions in Japan. The results could only be generalized, at best, to private high schools in metropolitan areas in Japan. However, as noted, the new 2020 curriculum had not yet been applied when the study was conducted, so the data was difficult to collect from public high schools. An additional survey would be required, encompassing a wider variety of school types and different regions.

Secondly, the school where the data was collected had many students who had studied abroad. 58 students who had studied in foreign countries or in an international school and the contents of their English classes could be different to other high schools in Japan. In a class with a large number of students who attended schools abroad, such students might be leading the English classes in terms of their English ability and, thus, may cause other students to be hesitant about using English in their class. It is worth investigating how such classes operate because this could be crucial in understanding the characteristics of the E1 and E5 groups in more detail.

Finally, some research has revealed that children more easily acquire the accent of a target language than adults (Fledge & Yeni-Komshian, 1999). Moreover, as JASTEC noted, speaking proficiency could differ according to the gap in the age of starting English education. However, the present study only addressed a one-shot scale measurement using the C-test and focused solely on the language proficiency, and did not cover speaking ability or English pronunciation, which is most likely to be affected by early English education. No data is presented for measures of the individual skills because time and funding were insufficient to survey the four skills (i.e., reading, listening, writing, and speaking) and English pronunciation. The present study should have measured the four language skills individually to discuss the effect of an early English education.

7. Future Research Aspects

As noted, the data were not in line with the objective of the study. Therefore, future research should be ameliorated to address the goal.

Future studies should consider including motivation (Pfenninger and Singleton, 2016) and willingness to communicate (Yashima, 2002) because one of the aims of early English education that MEXT wanted may be accomplished in terms of promoting their motivation for using English and reducing their anxiety to communicate in English. The percentage of students going to study abroad in the early starters (42%) was higher than the late starters (22%). Although the present study failed to determine whether the difference simply occurred by chance, this may suggest that early starters possess more motivation or willingness to communicate with people of other cultures. Therefore, future studies should examine the participants' attitudes in terms of their willingness to communicate and their interest in learning English.

Further, the present study did not consider what the early starters had learned at their elementary school. Given how and what the early starters had learned, future studies could determine their achievements in high school. Classroom observation and textbook analysis at the elementary school level may play a vital role in understanding whether the early starters could improve their proficiency. Therefore, future research should involve these factors to understand the early starters' English education.

8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings suggest that when they start the final year of high school, students who started studying English in the first grade showed less improvement in English proficiency than students who started to study English in the fifth grade. Even though this study was conducted at a private elementary school that emphasized English education, the students who started to learn English in the first grade found it difficult to meet the criteria set by the Action Plan (2003), or achieve the CEFR A2 level when they were in the third grade of high school.

The debate regarding English education in elementary school has lasted for many years in Japan, and the issue will continue to be discussed in many regions. Therefore, it is important to further examine English education at the elementary school level. In this sense, the present study contributes to the discussion about English education at elementary school and hopes it leads to deeper discussion in further research.

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Appendix 1 One paragraph of the C-test used in the present research

④ The Entrance Exam System (Lv.3)

Perhaps the most stressful period in the life of students in Japan comes towards the end of high school, when they prepare for and take exams to get into university.

The unive() entrance ex() system i() often cal() “examination hell.” Stud() study ha() for ma() months t() prepare f() tests i() which, in ju() a few ho(), their wh() future se() to be dec(). During t() exam sea(), national newsp() and maga() put stor() about t() tests o() the fir() pages, as stud() are seen to be figh() an “examination war” to win a place at their chosen university.

(Cited from: What do you think? Spring 2013 – interactive skills for effective discussion Book I center for English discussion class.)