

[Note]

Changing Perceptions of English among Elementary School Children in Rural Japan

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Abstract

Foreign language education became an official part of the national elementary school curriculum in Japan in 2011 (MEXT, 2010). One of the main goals of this new class was to encourage a positive attitude towards not only foreign cultures but also foreign languages in elementary school children. This study assesses pupils' perceptions of English in the 5th and 6th grade through the use of Likert-type scales. This study shows that while 5th grade students (N=58) are initially positive to English, their feelings become less positive as 6th graders (N=63).

Introduction

With global trends, particularly in Asia, of introducing English education at younger and younger ages, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Culture, Sports, and Technology, known as MEXT, has made foreign language, and by extension English, education mandatory in elementary schools (MEXT, 2010). This decision mirrors the situation in various countries in Asia, where English has become a part of primary school curriculums, in Vietnam in 1995, Korea in 1997, Taiwan in 2001, as well as many other countries. Japan began implementation of official foreign language education in elementary schools in 2008 (MEXT, 2008). This began with the introduction of a new class period, which was introduced in 5th and 6th grade elementary school classrooms. This was part of an initiative by the Japanese government to improve English education in Japan. The guidelines set forth by MEXT made English mandatory in all schools by 2011 (MEXT, 2010). While the period is called a "period for the study of foreign languages," the textbook used focuses almost exclusively on English language instruction.

The decision to officially introduce a period for the study of foreign languages in elementary schools arose from differences in education levels between elementary schools. Prior to the guidelines set forth by MEXT, individual schools were given freedom to create their own

curriculum (Wakita, 2013). Schools had the freedom to decide what to teach and how often. This resulted in major gaps in the level of English education at different schools. It was under these circumstances that MEXT implemented guidelines for English in the nationwide curriculum.

The content of the period for the study of foreign languages consists of activities using English for communication, specifically focusing on developing listening and speaking skills (MEXT, 2008). The changes introduced by MEXT were designed to deepen pupils' understanding of foreign culture, develop a positive attitude towards learning foreign language, and to allow students to become familiar with the sounds of foreign languages (MEXT, 2008). This differs slightly from the education students received prior to implementation, as the MEXT guidelines call for broad cultural education. Many English curriculums used before the implementation of the nation system focused heavily on English vocabulary and situational English conversations without a cultural context.

In the new curriculum there is no writing or reading of language; the focus is on speaking and listening entirely. 6th grade students learn how to recognize the alphabet but no time is spent on writing or phonetics. Many junior high school teachers (Aomori City English Teachers Conference, 2012) have indicated that this earlier introduction to English in school has led to pupils being better at speaking and understanding spoken English. This issue was investigated by Uematsu (2010) who found that students who had studied English in elementary school outperformed those who had not by a significant degree in listening and speaking tests, and by a smaller degree in vocabulary/grammar and reading tests.

In a study by Nishida (2006) elementary school teachers who piloted the introduction of English in the 5th and 6th grade were asked about pupils' reaction to that instruction. The results show that teachers believed that pupils were positive to English in the 5th grade, and mostly positive in the 6th grade (Nishida, 2006). This study goes beyond that done by Nishida and asks those questions directly to the pupils.

The primary objective of foreign language activities is developing pupils' communication abilities in a foreign language through various experiences while also developing the pupils' interest in foreign cultures (MEXT, 2010). The written objectives also state that pupils will develop a positive attitude towards communication and become familiar with the sounds of English (MEXT, 2010). Uematsu (2010) found a positive connect between elementary school student who had been exposed to English language learning and their performance in junior high school. This study questions whether elementary school English education is effective in driving pupils' interest in English. It is often assumed that Japanese pupils will like English, and that a fun, easy English class will in turn lead to more highly motivated pupils. Through the use of a survey with Likert type items, this study seeks to evaluate how pupils' perceptions of English may have changed

after one year (or less) of English education for 5th graders, and nearly two years of English education for 6th graders.

Methods

This study was conducted in a small rural area of northern Japan in 2012. 5th and 6th grade elementary school pupils in four schools were given a Likert-type questionnaire about their opinion of English. Fifty-eight 5th grade students participated and sixty-three 6th grade students participated (n=121). The questionnaire was necessarily written in Japanese. The survey was translated by the researcher with help from native speaking Japanese teachers. The pupils' homeroom teacher helped with the administration of the questionnaires and clarified questions and the method for answering when needed.

Permission was obtained from the schools for the administration of this questionnaire. The students did not indicate their name and the physical forms were discarded after the data was analyzed.

The questionnaire consisted of five Likert-type questions. The questions are as follows (See Appendix B for Japanese translations):

1. I like English
2. Since I started studying English, I have come to like English more.
3. I am more interested in other cultures than before I began studying English.
4. I can remember what I learned in English class.
5. Having studied English, I will have better opportunities in life.

The students answered the questions on a five-point scale anchored with strongly agree and strongly disagree. The data for 5th and 6th graders was compiled and analyzed using quantitative analysis. Due to the differences in sample sizes (N= 58 and N=63) all data was converted to percentages for comparison purposes and discussion.

In addition, ANOVA analysis was run, to account for the small number of students, response categories were combine, with strongly agree and agree, and strongly disagree with disagree, along with a neutral response, to create three possible answers. The changes between the 5th and 6th grade in question 1-3 was not statistically significant. However, the changes in questions 4 and 5 were statistically significant to $p < .05$.

Results

Graphs of student responses to each question are presented in appendix 1.

By analyzing the data it is clear that 5th graders rated English favorably, with 89% rating English favorably and 67% saying they like English more due to English class. An additional 84% of 5th graders wanted to learn more about foreign cultures. The pupils also showed a favorable outlook on English, with 64% saying they remember what they learn in class, and 77% stating that English is useful for their futures.

6th graders, however, rated English less favorably. While 70% stated they liked English, the distribution of those who liked English changed significantly. While 60% of 5th graders stated they strongly liked English, only 40% of 6th graders stated they strongly liked English. This trend continued with question 2. 6th graders did not feel as strongly about liking English after studying it in elementary school.

The results of question 3 showed that after spending nearly two years learning about other cultures through the medium of English language study, the 6th grade pupils were less enthusiastic than when they began in the 5th grade. The loss of enthusiasm is evident in the results. Only 16% of 5th graders were neutral, with zero feeling negative, where as a full 41% of 6th graders were neutral and a further 10% felt negatively.

6th graders also felt they did not remember what they learned in English class, with 32% agreeing with the statement and only 8% strongly agreeing. This is a total of only 40% of 6th graders who believe they remember what they learned compared to 64% of 5th graders. However, while this change at a glance seems unimportant, the ANOVA analysis revealed that in fact this was a statistically significant change. There was a statically significant result with [F (2, 53) = 2.996, p= 0.05]. The number of students whose opinions changed on the usefulness of English for their futures was shown to be significant as well, with [F (2,53) =3.809, p= 0.028]. Full data can be seen in below in table 1.

Result of ANOVA Table 1.

| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Sum of Squares | F | p |
|------------|-----------------------|-----------|----------------------------|----------|----------|
| Question 4 | | | | | |
| Within | 1.901 | 2 | 0.950 | 3.809 | 0.02848 |
| Between | 13.224 | 53 | 0.250 | | |
| Question 5 | | | | | |
| Within | 1.725 | 2 | 0.863 | 2.996 | 0.05851 |
| Between | 15.257 | 53 | 0.288 | | |

Discussion

The results of this study run counter to the assumption that by introducing English education in elementary school, children will come to enjoy English more, while this is not a directly stated purpose of elementary school English education, it is often taken for granted. The stated purpose of English in elementary school is to get students used to the sounds of English while encouraging an interest in communication (MEXT, 2010). They learn to speak and play games with no focus on grammar or writing. In this learning environment, it is often assumed that children will come to like English. This study, however, shows this assumption to be flawed.

This study expected that 5th graders and 6th graders would both agree that they liked English to similar degrees, however this was not the case. In fact, after studying English for over a year, 6th grader students were shown to like English less than 5th graders who had been studying for a year or less. The cause for this may be found in the teaching methods employed in the schools. This can be partially seen in the results, which show that while 5th graders rated the influence of their English class favorably, 6th graders were less likely to agree. It is also possible that the 6th grade students simply felt uninhibited expressing their opinions.

The results of this study were consistent with those of Nishida (2006) who found that students in 6th grade rated the classroom experience as pleasant, rather than very pleasant. The difference between the two groups, then, is not exceedingly unexpected as it shows a result consistent with previous research. This does raise the question of why the perception of elementary school education is so highly regarded, when the results run counter to that assumption.

With the pupils' loss of interest in English, it then is no surprise that 6th graders felt they were not remembering what they were learning in class. Since the ultimate goal of elementary school English education is not the memorization of facts, but rather making the student familiar with English, it is not fair to say that this is a failing of the system, but it certainly points to a larger problem with the English education system in elementary schools as a whole.

There are many opportunities for future study of the overall effectiveness of elementary school English education. While this study addresses pupils at young ages and their opinions, it does not take later academic performance into consideration. While the goal of elementary school English education is not the explicit instruction of English, clearly the goal is to motivate students to continue their education in junior high school and beyond. Uematsu (2010) investigated this issue and found no long-term significant correlation between students who had experienced English education and those who had not in the realm of motivation and more saliently to this study, attitude towards English. Perhaps this may be accounted for in the lack of positive opinions towards English held by the 6th grade students in this study.

What then, does the future of English hold? Whether or not the current educational system is working the ministry of education has proposed that English education begin at 3rd grade with formal education commencing from 5th grade (Japan Today, 2014). If this plan is implemented, then the results of this study are even more critical. Without serious consideration of the methods and pupils attitudes towards English education, it may not be in the best interests of the ministry of education to implement English education at an even earlier age.

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Appendix A.

Figure 1.

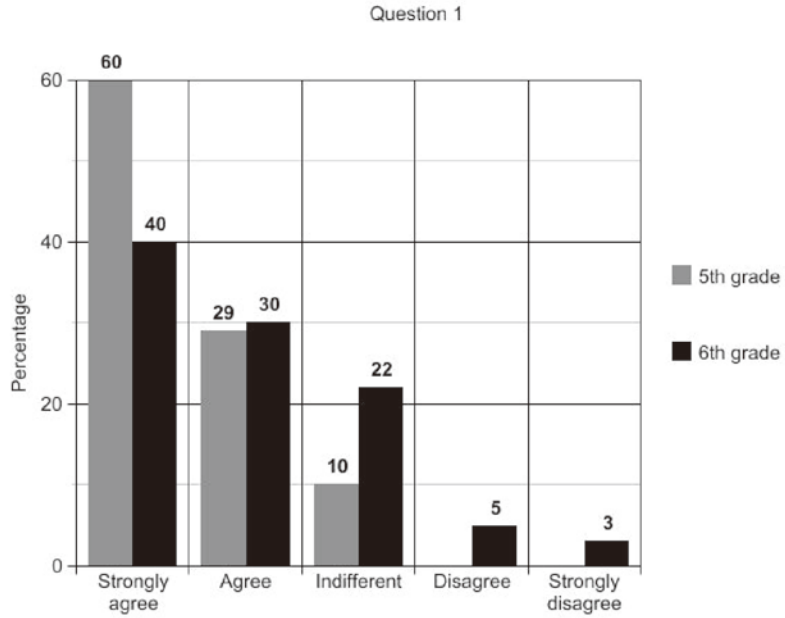


Figure 2.

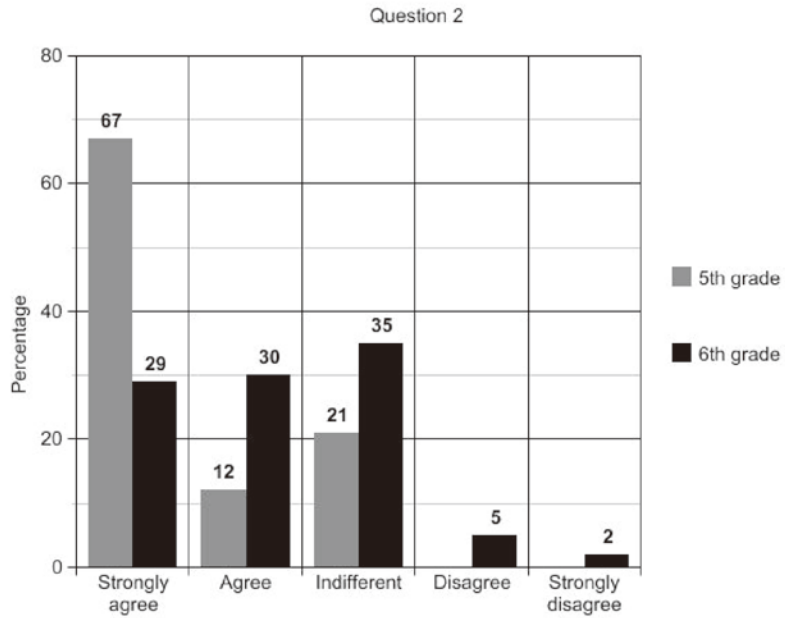


Figure 3.

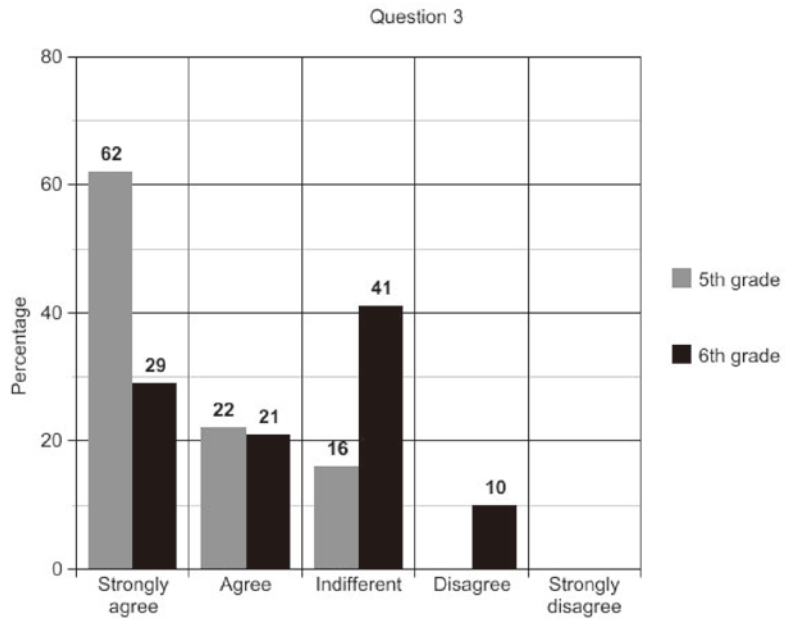


Figure 4.

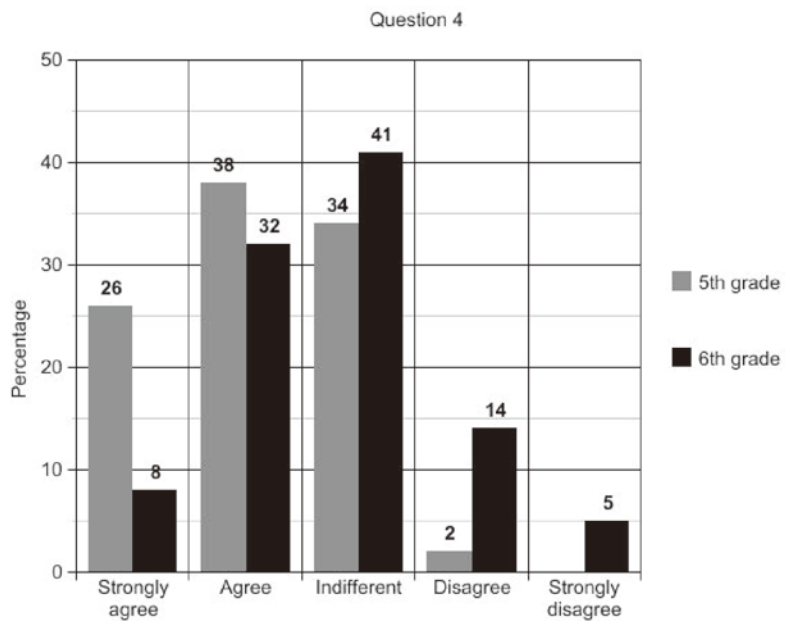
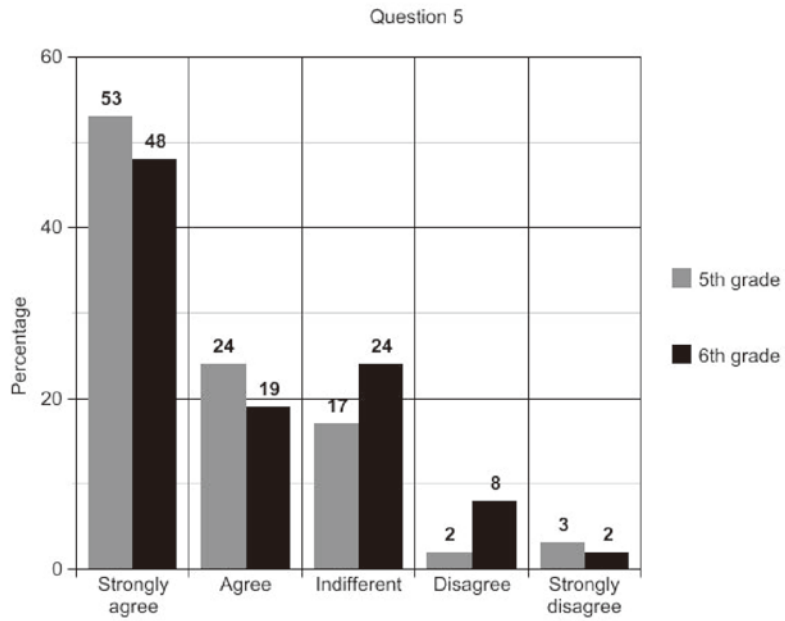


Figure 5.



Appendix B.

5 - 6年生の英語のアンケート

1. 英語が好きです。
2. 英語を勉強して、気になってきました。
3. 世界の文化をもっと勉強したい
4. 習った英語を覚えられます。
5. 英語を習ったら、将来自分をもっとたくさんのことをできるようになると思う。