

Japanese University Students' Perception of Studying English: A Preliminary Pilot Study Comparing Students Who Started Studying English from Different Ages

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Introduction

English is a global language and is not only spoken as a first language but also acquired as a second language (L2) in many countries around the world. In the case of Japan, English is a mandatory subject taught as a foreign language beginning in junior high school in the country up until 2002. However, this began to change in 2002, when the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) started to implement the 'Period for Integrated Studies' into the elementary school curriculum (MEXT, 2001). In this 'Period for Integrated Studies' class at elementary schools, teachers could decide what content they wanted to teach, and it did not necessarily have to be English. 'Foreign Language Activities' were included as a part of the elective curriculum, and public schools started implementing English-related activities during this class. The main objective of the 'Foreign Language Activities' was "To form the foundation of pupils' communicative abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages" (MEXT, 2003, para. 1). The next big step occurred in 2011, when MEXT officially implemented English classes for fifth and sixth grade elementary schools in Japan. After this, it is worth noting that in 2020, elementary school students in third and fourth grade also started to have English classes once a week, in anticipation of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (MEXT, 2014). When English lessons were classified as 'Foreign Language Activities', grades were not given. However, under the current curriculum, grades are given to fifth- and sixth-grade students for their English classes.

The rationale behind the implementation of elementary school English classes was to

prepare Japanese students studying English to communicate more in English as an L2 as necessitated by Globalization (MEXT, 2014). In Japan, where English is not widely spoken in everyday life, it can be difficult to use English outside of the English classroom. There has always also been the belief 'the earlier the better' when people consider studying an L2 and so an earlier start for speaking could have been considered effective when studying English in Japan. However, despite government effort to improve the curriculum through changes over the last 20 years or so in Japan, when MEXT (2018) conducted a study with 60,000 high school students for the four skills of English (10,000 students for the speaking test), they found less than 40% of Japanese high school students had reached the A2 Level in speaking, listening, reading, and writing in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This could suggest that there needs to be even more changes to the curriculum or ways of teaching to have an impact on Japanese students' English proficiency.

During the major phases of implementing the English curriculum at the elementary school level in Japan, there has been debate as to whether English should be taught from this age group or not. Otsu (2004, 2005) has questioned whether English should be taught at public elementary schools at all. One of his arguments against the implementation of English classes at public elementary schools was that if a homeroom teacher is not certified to teach English nevertheless teaches it to students, it can cause problems as the teacher lacks the specialized expertise necessary to teach the language accurately. Fennelly and Luxton (2011) conducted a survey and found that most Japanese homeroom teachers who taught English at their elementary schools did not feel confident about their teaching of English and their own English-speaking skills, which supported Otsu's argument of elementary school homeroom teachers not being suitable to teach English. Another of Otsu's arguments was that if teachers are unable to provide models of accurate pronunciation for students at a young age, this could make it more difficult to correct their pronunciation when they get older. He also discusses that acquiring Japanese, their first language, is more important than teaching English from a young age.

At this point, due to the lack of research, it is difficult to conclude whether starting English classes from elementary school is effective or not considering English proficiency. The content taught in the English classes have differed depending on the schools and the teachers. Some schools have had Assistant Language Teachers who are often native speakers of English assist in the English classes, while other elementary schools have had only their homeroom teachers provide English instruction (Martin, 2010). More research is needed in this field because soon, all university students in Japan will have received some kind of English

instruction during their elementary school days, which might make it difficult to collect data and compare whether English education from the elementary school level is effective or not. As a contribution, this study is a preliminary investigation of whether there is a difference between students' motivation towards English learning and their perception of their English skills, when comparing university students who started learning English in elementary school with those who began learning it in junior high school in Japan.

Previous Studies

In a foreign language setting such as Japan, it is crucial for Japanese students to be able to maintain their motivation during their English studies, as for some of them it is difficult to stay motivated throughout the long years they are required to study English as a mandatory or quasi-mandatory subject in school or at university. They may also need to study English to gain admission to schools of their choice, or be eligible for highly competitive positions when they seek employment. Motivation is considered an important factor when acquiring an L2 (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) and without sufficient motivation, even an L2 learner with high aptitude cannot successfully acquire the target language (Dörnyei, 2005). As currently many elementary school students in Japan may be studying English from third grade, they could be studying four years of English in elementary school, three years in junior high school, three years in senior high school, and in many cases, they study English at university. During these 10 to 14 years, it would be necessary for the students to be not only interested in studying English, but also to be interested in learning about other cultures and languages. When 'Foreign Language Activities' were introduced at elementary schools in Japan, one of the main desired outcomes was that children become accustomed to other languages and cultures (MEXT, 2014); but studies measuring these outcomes are needed in the field.

There have been some studies which have investigated Japanese university students' motivation and proficiency. Ogane and Sakamoto (1997) researched the English proficiency of Japanese university students by measuring listening, structure, and vocabulary sections of the Comprehensive English Language Test (CELT) and self-reported motivation to study English and a strong correlation was found between their attained levels of proficiency and motivation. However, Yamashiro and Sasaki (1999) conducted a study with 155 Japanese university students and found that Self-reported Effect and Study Habits were only weakly correlated with English proficiency. Suzuki (2009) also examined students' self-reported

motivation scales and English proficiency with a test developed by the researcher based on the STEP-Eiken test. In Suzuki's study, a weak correlation within the second-year students was found with Integrative Motivation, and with regard to the third-year students, a moderate correlation was found. As can be seen with the previous studies, conclusions about university students' proficiency and perception cannot be made yet.

Considering studies which have looked into students' perception of their English studies, Ball and Edelman (2018) conducted a study with Japanese university students in which they found that the students considered studying English very important for their futures, but they did not believe themselves to be competent in English, especially regarding the communicative aspects. Nishima and Yashida (2017) conducted a large-scale study with Japanese university students, and they found that students with childhood experience studying English showed higher levels of attained language proficiency when compared to students with no childhood experience of studying English. However, as Nishima and Yashida mentioned, there is hardly any research which has investigated data regarding childhood English experience. Hence, the present study examines whether providing English instruction from a young age before junior high school may have a long-term beneficial effect on Japanese university students' acquisition of English.

Method

Research Questions

- (1) What is the ratio of current university students who started studying English when they were in elementary school or in junior high school?
- (2) When students are divided into two groups based on the ages at which they started studying English, can differences or similarities be seen between their perceptions regarding the study of English?

Participants

The participants in this study were First Year to Third Year 32 undergraduates from three universities in Tokyo, Japan. One university was a national university, and the other two were private universities. The participants were either majoring in either Music (20 students) or Literature (12 students) at their universities. All the students were taking at least one English class at university at the time of the study, and some of them were studying a third language such as French, German, Italian, Korean, Chinese either within

or outside their universities. All of the students were in an Intermediate-Level or Advanced-Level English class at their university and none of the participants in this study had studied abroad.

It must be noted that many of the participants had studied English at not only school, but at English conversation schools or cram schools. This is quite common in Japan, and so it is extremely difficult to find Japanese university students who have never studied English outside of school. For this reason and to answer the research questions, the students were divided into two groups based on the age they started English.

Research Design

A questionnaire in Japanese was self-designed and the items consisted of five questions related to their background information and 15 statements to be rated on a five-point Likert scale (Appendix A). The questionnaires were answered by 32 undergraduate university students using Google Forms and none of them were left incomplete. The university students were not informed of the precise research questions behind the questionnaire, beyond saying that it was a questionnaire which would be used for research purposes with a focus on English learning experiences and perceptions. Statements 1 to 7 and 12 to 15 were questions related to students' motivation and perception of their English studies. Statements 8, 9, 10, and 11 were intended to investigate whether there was a difference between the two groups regarding the participants' perception of their speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills.

Procedure

Students who voluntarily agreed to participate in this study filled in the questionnaire in Japanese given in Appendix A and Appendix B is an English translation of the questionnaire and was not distributed to the participants. The questionnaire was distributed to the students during the summer vacation, so as not to put pressure on them during the regular semester and was completed accordingly in July and August of 2022.

Results

As the data collected in this study were gathered on a small scale, a qualitative analysis was not conducted. Students from three universities were included in this study to have a broad group of students participate in this study as it was a preliminary study and what their university's curriculum or what the participants' university specializes in could have

an impact on the results. Out of the 32 participants in the study, 10 answered that they started studying English from junior high school. 22 of the participants answered that they had started studying English during their elementary school years or before. 7 out of the 22 students had studied English at their elementary schools, and 15 of the students had studied at English language schools or cram schools as well as at their elementary schools. For this study, the respondents were separated into two groups. One group comprised those who had started studying English from junior high school (“JH”), while the other group was composed of those who started studying the language during their elementary school years, or in some cases, prior to elementary school (“ES”). There were 6 Music major students and 4 Literature major students in the JH group. In the ES group, there were 16 students majoring in Music and 6 students majoring in Literature.

Regarding Statement 1 (“I like studying English”), most participants in both groups answered either that they strongly agreed or agreed with this view. In the JH group, 7 out of 10 students answered that they strongly agreed with this view indicating that they like studying English. In the ES group, 15 out of 32 respondents answered that they agreed with the statement that they liked studying English, while 6 students answered that they strongly agreed with the statement.

For Statement 2 (“I like studying English at university”), fewer students answered with positive responses compared to Statement 1, with only 1 student answering Strongly Agree in each group. The participants enjoyed studying English, but not as much when they regarded it as a requirement of their university studies. In Statement 3 (“I consider myself good at communicating in English”), more than half of the students in both groups answered either Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly Disagree in response to this statement. In the ES group, 11 students answered that they Disagree with the statement about having good English communication skills.

In Statement 4 (“I am interested in other cultures or languages”), in both groups all students answered either Strongly Agree or Agree. Out of the 32 students who participated in the study, no one answered that they were not interested in other languages or cultures. When looking into the data, the age at which they began to study English does not seem to have an effect on university students’ interests in other cultures and languages.

Consequently, Statement 5 (“I consider myself motivated to study English”) and Statement 6 (“I consider myself motivated to study English at university”) elicited similar results, with more than half of the students answering Agree or Strongly Agree to both items. 17 out of 32 of the ES students answered either Strongly Agree or Agree to Statement 5, and 7 out

of 10 respondents in the JH group selected Strongly Agree on Statement 5. Coming to Statement 6, 21 respondents in the ES group answered that they agreed or strongly agreed that they felt motivated in studying English at university. In the JH group, 7 out of 10 students answered that they were motivated to study English at university. This shows different results from those obtained for Statement 2 ("I like studying English at university"), with which more than half of the participants answered that they disagreed or strongly disagreed. In this study, the respondents feel motivated to study English even if they do not necessarily enjoy classes at university. As students receive grades for English courses, and passing English classes is crucial to graduate from their universities, they may have answered that they are motivated to study at university due to this academic pressure.

Statement 7 ("I consider my English level high") yielded interesting results. In the JH group, the students' answers varied between 3 answers: 4 students indicated that they Agree, 2 students said they were Neutral, and 3 students selected Strongly Disagree. However, in the JH group, 14 participants answered that they disagreed with the view that their overall English skills are high. These results are consistent with those of Ball and Edelman (2018), who found that participants who started studying English from an early age did not believe that they were competent in English.

Statements 8, 9, 10, and 11 were intended to investigate whether there was a difference between the two groups with regard to the participants' perception of their speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. In the JH group, the answers varied as to whether they liked speaking, writing and reading in English. However, 6 out of 10 students answered that they like listening in English which was a larger number of participants compared to the other skills. In contrast, the ES group exhibited interesting results. With regard to all four skills, among the ES students, more than half of the participants answered that they liked speaking, listening, reading and writing in English. This difference may have arisen due to the small number of participants in the JH group, but the apparent conflict between the ES respondents' reported enjoyment of acquiring English skills and their low perception of their English skills needs to be investigated in future research.

When looking into Statement 12 ("I agree with studying English from elementary school"), the group in which students had started studying English from junior high school, 6 students answered that they strongly agreed, 2 students answered they agreed, and 2 students answered they felt neutral about this question. None of the participants answered that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with studying English from elementary school. In the other group, 14 students selected strongly agree, 8 students

chose to agree, 1 student disagreed, and 1 student selected Strongly Disagree. In Statement 13 (“I think I need English for my future.”), the participants were asked whether they thought that they needed English for their future. All participants in both groups selected either Strongly Agree or Agree for this statement except for 1 student in the ES group. Considering Statement 14 (“I think I will study English after I graduate from university”), 6 students in the JS group selected Strongly Agree with 3 students answering Neutral, and 9 students in the ES group answered Strongly Agree with 12 students selecting Neutral. It must be noted that the number of participants who considered English needed for their future was more than the number of students who thought they would study English after they graduate from university in this study. Many of them consider English important for their future in this study, but they are not sure whether they will continue studying English after they graduate.

Statement 15 (“I am interested in studying abroad in the future”) showed similar results to Statement 14 in both groups. 6 participants selected Strongly Agree and 3 answered that they felt neutral in the JS group. In the ES group, 9 participants selected Strongly Agree, and 12 selected Neutral (1 student answered Disagree and 2 students selected Strongly Disagree).

Discussion

As can be seen in the data collected in this study, the number of participants was small as it was a preliminary pilot study. The number of participants in the JH group was even smaller than the ES group, and for future research an equal or nearly equal number of participants in both groups would be ideal. It is also difficult to compare the participants' perception of their English studies, as the English instruction they received until university differed greatly. Some students had received English education from junior high school, while others had begun receiving English instruction at their elementary schools, but the focus of their English education could also have differed. At some high schools in Japan, the focus of English class is preparing them for university entrance exams, while other schools may be teaching more communication skills in English. In this study, 9 participants had started learning English at elementary school, while 13 students had received English education not only at their elementary schools but also through language schools or cram schools. It should also be pointed out that 10 out of 32 participants had started studying English from junior high school, and it is important that more research be conducted with

current or future university students as soon as possible, as it will become extremely difficult to find Japanese university students who commenced their study of English from junior high school in the near future, due to the change in the countrywide curriculum. Although this was a small-scale study, it showed some interesting results which could serve as a starting point for future research in the field.

More than 70% of the participants in both groups answered that they liked studying English and were motivated. However, there was a difference between the motivation levels in the two groups. One was that the participants *felt motivated* to study English at university, but not all of these participants answered that they *liked* studying at university. More research should be done inquiring into this difference between the participant groups' motivations (studying English before and during their university years), as there does not seem to be a large difference in the motivation levels when comparing the two groups.

All students in both groups answered that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statement about being interested in other cultures or languages. Although teachers in Japan may be incorporating cultural differences in their elementary school English curriculum, it may not be necessary to have students be introduced to and learn about other cultures beginning in elementary school. Since the hours of English classes in elementary schools are limited, the content of the classes could be a topic that needs to be discussed in the future.

If students begin studying English from a young age, it would be considered that they feel confident about their English skills. However, as can be seen in the results in Statement 7, more than half of the students did not consider their overall English skills to be high. Students' confidence and the age at which they start acquiring English in Japan needs to be researched in the future as it is important for Japanese students to feel confident about their communication skills in English, especially if the focus in elementary school English classes is on learning how to communicate with others.

When it comes to the four different communicative skills in English, it was interesting that the JH group did not manifest consistent results. This could have been because the number of participants was small, in comparison to the group that did not start learning English from a younger age. However, more than half of the ES group answered that they Agree or Strongly Agree with this statement. This means that they like studying the four skills of English, but as explained earlier, the small number of students in the other group could have skewed the results.

When looking into Statement 12, on whether English should be taught from elementary school, it is worth noting that most students either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. There were 2 students in the ES group who answered disagree or strongly disagree with this statement, but it cannot be told why they answered disagree as the questionnaires were answered anonymously. In future studies, it would be interesting to conduct interviews with university students whether they think that elementary school students should study English from an early age, in consideration of their own experiences of having received English education from a young age themselves.

Statements 13, 14, and 15 also showed interesting results. Although in both groups, most students considered English important for their future, they did not necessarily think that they will study English after graduation. This could be because currently they are required to study English as a part of their university curriculum to graduate, but they are not sure whether they want to continue their English studies after their graduation. What also needs to be pointed out is that the proportion of students who answered that they would study English in the future was exactly the same as the proportion of students who answered that they were interested in studying abroad in the future. There does not seem to be a difference between the two groups' levels of motivation to study abroad or to keep on studying English after graduation. In this study, being introduced to English studies from a young age may not have much of an impact on students' desire to study abroad. These results are similar to those of students being interested in studying other cultures and languages. Starting at a younger age or from elementary school may not have positive nor negative effects on these statements. However, as mentioned above, this study was a small-scale study and the number of participants in the JH group was particularly small. Further information will not be discussed about the participants' majors as the numbers were small in the groups in this study and it is difficult to identify whether it the participants' majors had an impact on the results. However, to further our knowledge about Japanese students' motivation and perception about studying English, more research needs to be conducted to compare the two groups. It is also important to consider the content of the English classes and curriculum after researching what is effective for Japanese speakers studying English as an L2 in Japan.

Conclusion

Although preliminary, the results have shown that similarities and differences show up

between university students who began studying English from elementary school or from junior high school. If further studies show that there are significant differences between students who started English in elementary school and in junior high school, this could lead to more ideas on changing the curriculum or content of the English classes in Japan.

Comparing these ES and JH groups does not prove that introducing Japanese learners to English at these earlier or later stages is uniformly positive, negative, or neutral. It is also *not* the purpose to argue simplistically that because the effects of providing English education at progressively earlier ages are inconclusive, schools and teachers should therefore change their English curriculum. However, close examination of these results and further research along these lines will provide help identify which factors correlate with beneficial effects. Examining these correlations will enable educators, administrators, and parents to make decisions in an informed manner about how to achieve their desired educational goals more efficiently and effectively, while functioning within finite time constraints.

Due to the recent changes in the country-wide curriculum, most Japanese university students in the imminent future will have received some kind of English education throughout their elementary school days. When the transition is complete, it would be impossible to identify, let alone compare, two such distinct groups. Hence this type of research would need to be conducted as soon as possible. Since English classes have officially started at elementary school, it would be important to investigate what should be taught in the curriculum for English teaching in Japan to become effective and continue research to improve Japanese students' English skills and maintain their motivation throughout their English studies.

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Appendix A

アンケート 英語の学習について

- (1) 学部、専攻、学年を教えてください。
- (2) 英語の学習を始めたのは何歳の時ですか？
- (3) 英語の学習を始めたのはどこですか？（例：中学の授業、小学校の授業、英会話学校など）
- (4) 英語以外の言語を学習されている方はどの言語かを教えてください。
- (5) 留学や海外に住んでいた頃がある場合は場所と期間を教えてください。

以下の質問はご自身に当てはまるところを一つ選んでください。

1. 英語の学習は好きですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
2. 大学で英語を学習するのは好きですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
3. ご自分は英語でコミュニケーションをとるのは上手な方だと思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
4. 他の言語や文化について興味はありますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
5. 英語の学習に対して、ご自分は意欲的だと思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
6. 大学の授業で英語を学習するのに関して意欲的ですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
7. ご自分の英語の全体的な力は高いと思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
8. 英語のスピーキングは好きですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
9. 英語のリスニングは好きですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
10. 英語のリーディングは好きですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
11. 英語のライティングは好きですか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
12. 小学校から英語の学習をするべきだと思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
13. 英語はご自身の将来に必要なだと思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
14. 大学を卒業してからも英語を学習すると思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない
15. 今ではなくても、いずれ留学をしてみたいと思いますか。
とてもそう思う　そう思う　どちらとも言えない　そう思わない　全くそう思わない

Appendix B (English)

Questionnaire: About your English Studies

- (1) Please write the name of your department, major, and year at your university.
- (2) When did you start studying English?
- (3) Where did you start studying English (E.g. Junior high school classes, Elementary school classes, English language school etc.)
- (4) If you are studying any other languages, please write them down.
- (5) If you have experience studying or living abroad, please write the name of place and when you lived there.

Please choose 1 answer for each statement.

- | | | | | | |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. I enjoy studying English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 2. I enjoy studying English at university. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 3. I am good at communicating in English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 4. I am interested in other cultures or languages. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 5. I am motivated to study English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 6. I am motivated to study English at university. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 7. I consider my overall English level high. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 8. I like speaking in English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 9. I like listening in English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 10. I like reading in English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 11. I like writing in English. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 12. I agree with studying English from elementary school. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 13. I need English for my future. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 14. I will study English after I graduate from university. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
| 15. I am interested in studying abroad in the future. | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |

日本の大学生の英語学習に関する意識
——英語学習開始時期の異なる大学生を比較した予備調査——

川瀬 絢子

日本の公立小学校では2020年度より、5、6年生が英語を教科として学習するだけでなく、3、4年生も「外国語活動」の時間に主に英語を学習することとなった。一般的には、小学校という早期の段階から英語の授業が行われることによって日本人の英語学習者の英語の力が向上することが期待されているが、早期に英語学習を開始することが効果的であるかを検証した研究はほとんどなされていない。また、日本人の大学生が自分の英語の学習についてどのように考えているのかについての研究もあまり進んでいない。本研究は、予備調査として32人の大学生に英語の学習に関するアンケートを行い、英語を中学校から学び始めた参加者とそれ以前から学んでいた参加者に英語学習に対する動機づけや自分の英語力に対する評価について違いが出るのかを調査した。その結果、2つのグループの共通する部分と異なる部分が判明し、今後行う予定の大規模調査の足掛かりとなった。小学校から英語を学習している大学生が増えている中で、2つのグループを比較して早期に英語学習を開始する効果を検証する研究は早急に行われなければならないと考えられる。