Japanese public junior high school policy and reality

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In 2003 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology unveiled their new junior high school (JHS) English education policy, which focused strongly on oral communication. The research, based on JHSs in a mid-sized Japanese city (approx. pop. 478,000), focused predominantly on Japanese teachers of English (JTEs), but also included students, and their parents. Focus group sessions, questionnaires, and one-on-one interviews were used to collect data. The study reveals that passing the senior high school (SHS) entrance examination is the main concern for everyone involved and so, test impact from this examination exerts the greatest pressure on JHS JTEs. The JTEs also perceive themselves as facing other issues such as student motivation, JTE speaking proficiency, and large class sizes. The research also shows gaps between the official JHS policies and what is actually occurring.

　２００３年、文部科学省はオーラルコミュニケーションに重点をおいた新しい中学英語教育の指針を明らかにした。この調査は日本の中都市（人口約478,000人）の中学校に基づき、日本人英語教師だけでなく生徒、生徒の両親に主に焦点をあてたものである。グループセッション、アンケート、一対一のインタビューはデーターをまとめるために実施された。この研究は高校入学受験に皆が大きな関心があることから、中学校の日本人英語教師にも大きなプレッシャーを及ぼすことを明らかにした。また、日本人英語教師は生徒のやる気、教師のスピーキング技量、クラスの大きさの問題にも直面した。この研究はまた公立中学校の指針と、現場での間での相違も表している。

English research on the Japanese public junior high school (JHS) English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching environment is inadequate considering the thousands of native English speakers employed as assistant language teachers (ALTs) to "team-teach" EFL in Japan. Many of these teachers have insufficient language skills to comprehend Japanese-based research. If accessible research was available that detailed the issues in the JHS EFL system then surely ALTs would have a greater understanding and sympathy towards their students, and the JTEs. This research examined how well public JHS EFL policy was being implemented in a mid-sized Japanese city and explored the handicaps that JTEs
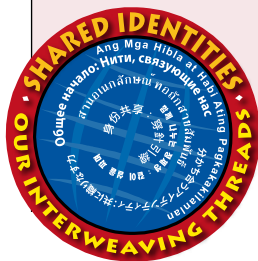
in the city perceived facing in teaching English speaking skills.

Japanese public junior high school EFL policy

In 2003 the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduced an "Action Plan" to cultivate English speaking skills in junior high school students. The plan stated: "On graduation from a junior high school, students can conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life." MEXT also publicly stipulated that in JHS the focus was to be on cultivating communication abilities in listening and speaking. MEXT stated they would assist in realising these goals by implementing small-group teaching and would stream students according to their English proficiency. MEXT also asserted that "almost all" English teachers would acquire English skills and attain the set scores in one of the three following English language tests:

- Pre-first level attainment in the English test conducted by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP)

- A score of 550 in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)

- A score of 730 or over in the Test of International Communication (TOEIC)

Research questions

The following research questions were developed in line with the aims of the study.

1. How well are MEXT JHS EFL policies being implemented?

2. What do JHS JTEs perceive as the biggest handicaps to teaching speaking skills?

Data collection

This research was conducted in the public JHSs of a mid-sized Japanese city with a population of 479, 471 (as at February 2008). The city's fulltime JTEs (a total of 90) were the only teachers surveyed because part-time JTEs were usually teachers of other subjects employed to fill English department "gaps" on a short-term basis and did not possess a long-term interest in JHS EFL. Other research participants were the students from two selected public JHSs, and their parents.

Two focus group sessions, comprising three JTEs each, were conducted to draw on JTE perspectives to aid in questionnaire item production. These sessions, run as guided discussions, gave me, as Gibbs (1997, p. 2) suggests, a "multiplicity of views". An example of a JTE perspective that led directly to the development of items #7 and #8 in the JTE questionnaire (see Appendix 1) was "our main task is to prepare students for their senior high school entry tests". Information gathered from the two sessions was also used to support and provide colour to questionnaire findings.

To promote response rates questionnaires needed to be short and unambiguous and, because they were to be used just once, validity and reliability were essential. I produced a "possible items" list for the JTE questionnaire based on points taken from EFL literature, items from questionnaires

by other researchers, and data from the focus groups. Two further item lists were developed from the same sources; one for the JHS student questionnaire and one for their parents.

Likert scales worded "全くそうである... 全くそうではない" and "強くそう思う... 全くそう思わない", which can be translated as meaning "completely agree… completely disagree" and "completely true… completely untrue" respectively, were attached to the items. The traditional "strongly agree… strongly disagree" scale was avoided because it violates the rules in subjective questioning by suggesting "an emotional component, a degree of conviction or caring about the answer over and above the cognitive task that is the central question" (Fowler,1995, p. 65). Negative choices were placed on the left end of each scale to reduce bias (Brace, 2004).

The Likert scales had a middle category in items where participants may not possess an answer, e.g. "MEXT considers the opinions of JTEs when they write the English syllabus."

Where participants would more likely have an answer the middle option was avoided and only four choices were offered, e.g. "MEXT policies affect my lesson content."

Item lists for the JTEs, students and their parents were sent to four people to be *Q-sort*ed. A Q-sort can be described as "an iterative process in which the degree of agreement between judges forms the basis of assessing construct validity and improving reliability of constructs" (Nahm, Solis-Galvan, Rao, & Ragun-Nathan, 2002, p. 2). The Q-sort judges were selected because of their diverse backgrounds: two Japanese university EFL professors (one a native speaker and the other a non-native speaker), a journalist, and an English teacher (both native speakers). Along with the three item lists, Q-sort judges received a cover letter with instructions and separate construct placement grids for each item list.

Moore and Benbasat's *Hit Ratio* (1991) evaluation, presented in Nahm et al. (2002), was applied to the Q-sort results. The high percentage of items correctly placed by the judges in the construct placement grids amounted to a high degree of construct validity and reliability in the data collection tools once these items were combined to form questionnaires.

To promote response rates all three questionnaires were translated into Japanese. This procedure involved three stages using three separate translators as follows:

1. The questionnaires were translated from English to Japanese.

2. The Japanese versions were translated back into English by a different translator.

3. The original English questionnaires, used in stage one and the questionnaires translated back into English, in stage two, were compared. Items that did not match were given to a third translator to analyse and fix.

Three JTEs piloted the questionnaire, noting the completion time, ease of completion, ambiguous or inappropriate questions, and critiqued the style/layout. Students from a JHS English club piloted the student questionnaire and took the parent questionnaire home for their parents to pilot. Comments regarding these questionnaires were sent back to me by the head JTE of this

JHS and changes were made where advised.

All students at one JHS completed their questionnaire (see Appendix 2) during class and took questionnaires home to be completed by their parents (see Appendix 3). At the other JHS questionnaires were administered at JTE discretion. The total number of completed questionnaires received was: 337 student and parents 267. The JTE response rate was just over 63% of the 90 JTEs administered a questionnaire. Two one-on-one JTE interviews were conducted to expand on findings from the JTE questionnaire and focus group session findings. Direct quotes from these interviews and quotes written by JTEs on their returned questionnaires are shown in this article in italics. None of the quotes have been edited in any way.

Research question 1:

How well are MEXT JHS EFL policies being implemented?

The specific policies are:

- "Almost all" JTEs achieving set levels in one of the following English proficiency tests: STEP pre-first level, TOEFL 550, TOEIC 730 or over.

- A focus on listening and speaking abilities in JHS under the "Action Plan" designed to cultivate "English speaking skills in junior high school students", whereby the students would be able to "conduct basic communication with regard to areas such as greetings, responses, or topics relating to daily life" by the time they graduate.

JTEs are usually blamed by MEXT for low English speaking skills in students (Childs, 2005) and scholars like Nunan (2003) have agreed with this assertion, stating that JTE English proficiency levels are not high enough to give the students the input needed for language acquisition. In 2005, MEXT discovered that only 10% of public JHS JTEs had passed one of the English language tests to the set levels (Childs, 2005). Though JTEs in my research zone had higher rates, a little over 50%, achievement rates were not high enough to be considered the "almost all" JTEs that MEXT demanded.

Though MEXT also blames the JTEs for this issue (Childs) it is an unrealistic attitude in the current environment. JTEs must pay for their own tuition and attend English lessons in their own time if they want to increase their English competence. Furthermore, they receive no financial or logistical assistance in taking any of the stated English language tests. Possibly most important, upon reaching the achievement levels set by MEXT JTEs experience no improvement to their working conditions. It appears though that MEXT is not concerned by a lack of JTE achievement of the directives since interview participants maintained that individuals were not monitored by MEXT to see if they had reached the desired proficiency levels which matches the assertions of Rubrecht (2004).

The MEXT-JTE relationship is strained (see Figure 1). Comments made in focus group sessions, interviews, and written on returned questionnaires showed that JTEs do not respect MEXT. JTEs described them as "elite", "out-of-touch", and "unreal", and view MEXT as ignorant of JHS realities. An interviewed JTE asserted that, "MEXT are not

teachers, they don't know the students. They are unfamiliar with junior high school conditions. They don't even know the problems we are facing. We know the reality, they don't know the reality."
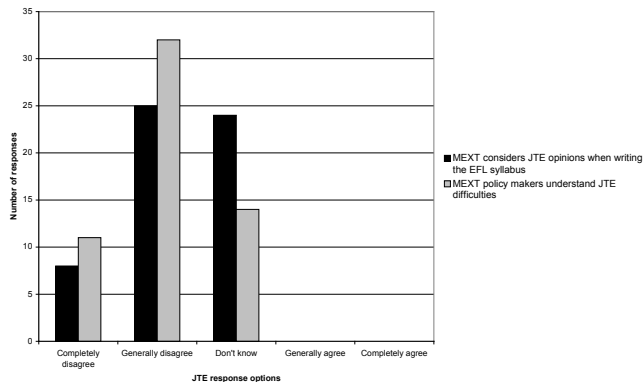

Figure 1. MEXT-JTE relations

The wording in some MEXT statements has impeded policy implementation. When MEXT stated "Almost all English teachers will acquire" certain proficiency levels one could question what percentage "almost" is, who decides which JTEs are tested, and what happens to the JTEs if they do not achieve the levels specified. The 2003 "Action Plan" is equally confusing; the English skills required in talking about daily life are far beyond those for greetings and simple responses, yet these three points are explicitly grouped together.

MEXT EFL lesson policy implementation has been undermined because instruction has not been addressed in reforms. This has created a loophole whereby JTEs have been able to continue using the yakudoku method (Gorsuch, 2000). This method has been used for centuries in teaching foreign languages in Japan (O'Donnell, 2005) and is often thought of as a local version of grammar-translation (Gorsuch). One reason for yakudoku use may be that it makes maintaining student discipline in large classes easier because it gives students little freedom to become disruptive; they must simply listen, read, and write. Yakudoku is directly at odds with MEXT demands for EFL in JHS because it is a teacher-centred method and conducted almost exclusively in Japanese, starving students of English input. Gorsuch (1997, p. 42) found in her research that "the teachers created classes that resembled Japanese language classes more than English classes". Interviewed JTEs asserted that yakudoku was the method of choice in the research zone. Prime reasons given by these JTEs for the continued use of yakudoku were test impact and JTE ignorance; yakudoku is the only style that many JTEs know and most think it is too hard to change their teaching method.

Research question 2:

What do JHS JTEs perceive as the biggest handicaps to teaching speaking skills?

JTEs ranked in-lesson time constraints and the senior high school (SHS) entrance examinations as the most significant handicaps in teaching English speaking skills in JHS (see Figure 2). These two issues could be combined under the heading 'Test Impact' because JTEs feel obliged to teach

exam relevant material before teaching unexamined skills such as speaking. As one JTE wrote that, "Speaking is the least important for the students so when there is limited time, which is often, speaking is cut from the lesson." Other significant difficulties were student motivation, JTE speaking proficiency, class size, outside time constraints, and textbook issues.
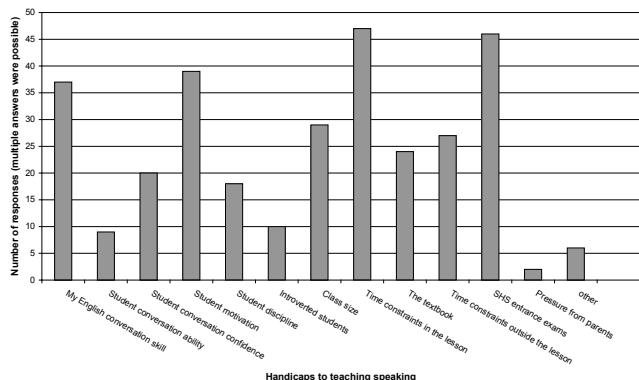

Figure 2. JHS JTE perceptions of the biggest handicaps to teaching English speaking skills

Test impact

Test impact can be either positive or negative depending on how it operates. If assessment and teaching practice match course goals and objectives, then it is positive. If assessment and teaching practice do not match course goals and objectives, it is negative (Brown & Hudson, 1998). Test impact adversely affects the tuition of English speech

in JHS because, although English is a core subject, there is no speaking component present in the SHS entrance examination (Akiyama, 2003). While most literature has concentrated on the university entrance examinations, the SHS entrance examinations are more important because they "determine (the) life options" of the students (Gordon, 2005, p. 465).

The surveyed JTEs were profoundly affected by the SHS entrance examinations which have become the beginning, middle, and end of the EFL academic process in the study area; a working definition of negative test impact. Interviewed JTEs and focus group participants said that they were judged on student results regardless of student ability and believed that they must do whatever they could to get their students into "good" senior high schools rather than provide students with the skills that would enable them to converse in English.

Of the surveyed JTEs, 86% admitted orientating their lessons towards helping their students pass the SHS entrance examinations, thereby becoming what Harmer (2003, p. 288) termed "client-satisfiers". A JTE surmised, "Many parents think that it doesn't make any sense if their child is good at speaking English yet fails the senior high school entrance examination." This opinion was accurate: I found that the students (see Figure 3) and their parents (see Figure 4) believed that passing the English section of the SHS entrance examination was the most important result to be gained from a JHS EFL education.
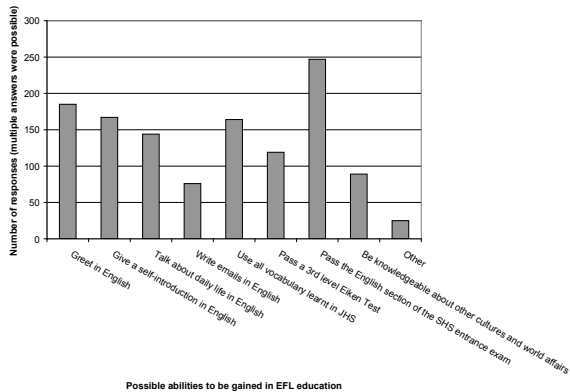
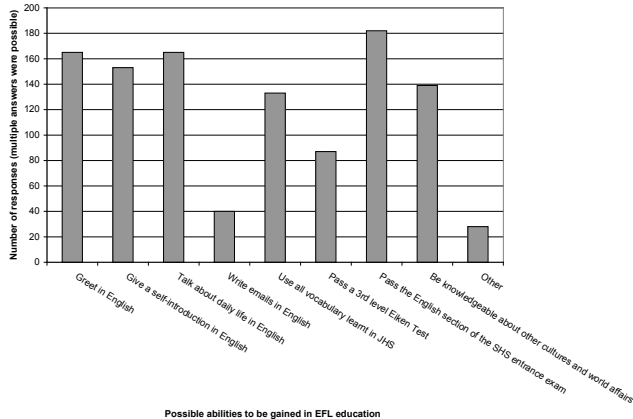**Figure 3. Abilities students want to gain from JHS EFL education**

Figure 4. Abilities parents want their child to obtain from JHS EFL education

Interviewed JTEs stated that the students' motivation to speak English decreased once they entered the second grade of JHS. This information was similar to the findings of Kimura, Nakata, & Okumura, (2001), and Childs (2006). My research showed that students believed English to be an important subject yet strongly disliked it (see Figure 5). I suggest this is due to three main reasons:

- Lesson content becomes focused on "Test English".

- Yakudoku use.

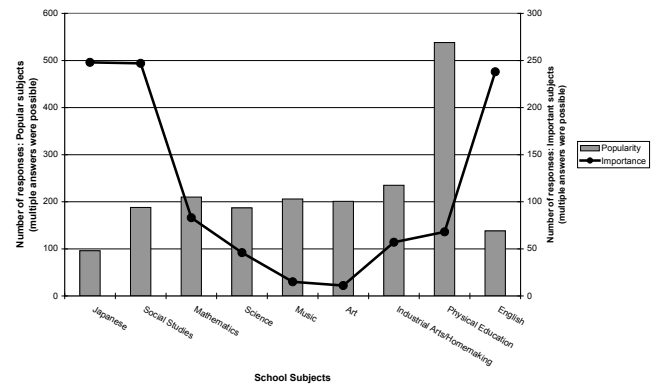- Students become aware of the SHS entrance exam struggle where speaking skills are irrelevant.

Figure 5. JHS subject popularity and importance ranking by students

The decreased motivation towards "irrelevant" skills has, according to JTEs, resulted in some students refusing to

speak any English. This highlighted the fact that JTEs are powerless to teach English speaking skills if the students do not want to learn them. Students are anxious over the SHS entrance examination so it is understandable that they are unmotivated to practice skills that will not alleviate some of the pressure they feel.

JTE English proficiency

Table 1 shows that a large majority of JTEs believed that their English speaking proficiency adversely affects their lessons.

Table 1. JTE perceptions that their speaking proficiency adversely influences their lessons

Response Options	Response Rates
Completely disagree	2
Generally disagree	7
Generally agree	36
Completely agree	12

Whether JTE perceptions regarding their own speaking proficiency were accurate is not necessarily the only problem. A low confidence in speaking English combined with the Japanese propensity to emphasize accuracy, and any teachers' fear of losing face in front of their students, can result in a serious English input deficiency for students because such JTEs probably avoid speaking English whenever possible – even in EFL lessons. The level of English used by more "confident" JTEs must also be

considered. Phrases such as "Sit down", "Repeat after me", and "Open your books", while valid input, are not of a level sufficient to raise student speaking proficiency.

The university education of the JTEs may be one reason behind their low English speaking confidence. Surveyed JTEs predominantly majored in one of three subjects: English Literature (32%), Education (28%), and English Linguistics (23%). The remaining JTEs majored in either French or German Literature. No surveyed JTE majored in EFL or had any formal EFL teacher training. Furthermore, most JTEs experienced only a two-week practical teaching placement session before becoming teachers. Interviewed JTEs related how they learnt their teaching method "on-the-job", which they asserted, was the Japanese style of education.

Class size

In 2002 MEXT and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) each conducted separate research that measured Japanese public JHS class sizes. The results differed in the class size mean: MEXT's mean was 31.7 students per class; OECD stated the mean was 34.3. Regardless of the accuracy of either figure, both figures exceeded the *OECD country mean* of 23.7 students per class. In another survey conducted by OECD involving 35 countries, Japan's average of 33.7 students per JHS class was the second highest behind South Korea (OECD, 2004). Surveyed countries included Mexico (30.1 students), the Slovak Republic (22.8 students), and the Czech Republic (23.2 students), which are all considerably poorer than Japan. It defies logic that an economic superpower dedicated

to maintaining a nation of well-educated people can retain such large classes.

Problems stemming from large class sizes include:

- difficulties in setting up and carrying out communicative tasks

- problems with individualizing work and giving feedback

- high noise levels, which affect neighbouring classes

- discipline problems that are more acute than in smaller classes

(LoCastro, 2001)

Data from the JTE questionnaire showed that JTEs regarded large classes as a major impediment to teaching oral communication. JTEs in the study zone were teaching classes far larger than their perceived threshold, which, when combined with the area's serious mixed ability problems, strained the JTEs further (see Table 2). Evidence from my research indicated that JTEs reduced the problems above by avoiding communicative activities altogether.

Time constraints outside of lessons

JTEs claimed that outside time constraints also negatively impacted their ability to teach English speaking skills because they had insufficient time to create speaking activities. Surveyed JTEs were involved in numerous non-lesson related duties, including school clubs, sports, and class trips. One JTE stated, "We live with the students－not

Table 2. Research zone class sizes

Measurement Type	Maximum Class Size	Actual Class Size
Mean	11.4	27.4
Mode	10 (19 responses)	35 (8 responses)
Highest stated size	30	38
Lowest stated size	3	15

Note: *Maximum Class Size* was the number of students in a class above which teaching oral communication is deemed to be impossible by JTEs.

Actual Class Size was the actual number of students in EFL classes in the study.

only in subject－we clean together, we eat lunch together, and we spend break-time together." Additionally, some JTEs were homeroom teachers which made them accountable for up to 40 students.

JHS teachers in Japan generally have a parental-like attitude towards their students and have responsibilities that extend into the outside community, night-time and weekends included. One focus group participant asserted that it was common for teachers from her school to attend festivals on the weekend to ensure students were behaving. Considering that over 75% of the JTEs in the research area were women, many of whom have domestic responsibilities, it is understandable that they have insufficient time to attend to things such as improving their own English proficiency.

Textbook issues

Textbooks are selected by the regional Board of Education, the local branch of MEXT, meaning different regions within Japan may use different EFL textbooks. The point that is consistent

is that all textbooks need MEXT approval. Therefore, if there are gaps between EFL policy and the EFL textbooks, the blame is MEXT's alone. The EFL textbooks being used in the study area at the time of data collection, the Sunshine English Course, were not designed for communicative activities. Analysis of these textbooks revealed that communicative activities—especially of a freer nature—were almost nonexistent. Over 50% of the speaking exercises in the second and third grade textbooks were substitution activities completed by inserting set phrases, provided in lists, into model sentences. The focus groups and interviewed JTEs all asserted that most JHS EFL teachers, especially those with low English speaking confidence, rely 100% on their textbooks. Below is a typical exercise from the second grade textbook:

> A: How was your vacation?
>
> B: It was nice. <u>I went to Tokyo with my family</u>.
>
> **Example.** go to Tokyo with my family
>
> 1. go to Kyoto with my family
>
> 2. ski with my friends
>
> 3. play tennis with my friends
>
> Sunshine English Course 2 (2006, p.13)

Research limitations

The small number of surveyed JTEs and the limited nature of questionnaires are two readily identifiable limitations of this research. While the JTE questionnaire response rate was good, the sample size was limited to only 90 potential responses from the beginning.

Conclusion and recommendations

Official MEXT policy is poorly adhered to at all levels. Sufficient numbers of surveyed JTEs had not achieved the levels demanded by MEXT in the set English proficiency examinations. However, my finding that approximately 50% of JTEs have achieved the desired levels was significantly more positive than the achievement levels reported by Childs in 2005. To simply blame JTEs for this situation is unfair. JTEs reported receiving no assistance with the various logistic difficulties in preparing for, getting to, and taking the tests. They also stated that the absence of incentives decreased their motivation to achieve the set goals. For the proficiency directives to have any major effect on current JTEs these issues must be addressed. The unhealthy relationship between MEXT and JTEs is also in urgent need of redress as this is a major reason for low policy application by JTEs. The hostility I found in JTEs appears to stem from the perception that MEXT is out-of-touch with JHS EFL and does not try to understand or alleviate the problems that JTEs face.

Junior high school EFL lesson policies were not implemented due to a number of "in-school" issues. MEXT is pushing the cultivation of speaking abilities in students, yet ambiguous policy wording allowed JTEs to continue using yakudoku. Inadequate JTE pre-service training must also be partly to blame for yakudoku use. JTE perceptions of their own English speaking proficiency betrayed their low speaking confidence in English which resulted in English being infrequently spoken in lessons. Test impact was likely to be another reason for EFL lessons being predominantly conducted in Japanese and certainly promoted yakudoku usage.

Test impact from the SHS entrance examination was by far the greatest handicap the JTEs reported facing in teaching oral communication. Most JTEs admitted orientating their lessons towards these examinations. Pressure from the students and their parents, who indicated their most desired result was the ability to pass the English section of the SHS high school entrance examination, motivated JTEs to focus on "exam English". My findings revealed that some students refused to work if the focus of the lesson was not relevant to the senior high school entrance examinations. One result of this concentration on the applied exam English is the unpopularity of EFL with students.

JTEs also perceived the large class sizes they taught to as a major issue. There has been no change in class sizes despite MEXT publicly asserting that small-group teaching would be implemented. Research area class sizes were over two-and-a-half times greater than the JTEs perceived maximum class size average for the effective teaching of English speaking skills. The large classes increased JTE stress caused by the mixed abilities of the students, which is another issue on MEXT's agenda that has not been addressed. Two further problems faced by JTEs in implementing MEXT lesson policies are the non-communicative textbooks that are used in class –approved by MEXT, ironically – and the lack of free-time that JTEs have outside of teaching. JTEs are extremely active and visible members of the communities in which their schools are situated, and more than three-quarters of JTEs in the study zone were women with domestic responsibilities. This meant that they had no time to improve their own English speaking proficiency levels.

Changes are overdue in the Japanese JHS EFL industry. MEXT needs to consult JTEs when designing new JHS EFL policies as the JTEs best understand this environment. MEXT should also do what it is asking JTEs to do－ implement the policies it recommends such as adopting student streaming based on proficiency and decreasing class sizes. When the handicaps faced by JTEs in teaching speaking skills are minimised, the SHS entrance examination features a speaking component, and the JTE-MEXT relationship is improved, there will be higher rates of policy implementation. Until these changes are realised, I hope this research will generate ALT sympathy for JTEs because they now have some insight into the challenges that their JTE colleagues face in their struggle to teach English speaking skills.

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