

# Learning to speak English: Japanese junior high school student views

## Keywords

JHS, student attitudes, oral skills,  
negative test impact

In 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) unveiled a new junior high school (JHS) English as a Foreign Language (EFL) policy that focused on oral communication. While evidence of policy non-compliance in schools exists, until now there has been no research on the attitudes of students in regard to learning English speaking skills. This paper reports on research carried out in two schools in a mid-sized Japanese city that investigated the opinions of students via questionnaires. The study reveals that although EFL education is considered very important, English is very unpopular compared to other subjects. While being able to communicate orally in English is a JHS EFL education outcome desired by students, passing the senior high school entrance examination is their main concern.

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、中学校における外国語としての英語(EFL)の新方針を発表した。いくつかの学校は方針に従わない傾向もあるが、英語のスピーキングスキル学習に関して、生徒に対する研究はまだ為されていない。本論では、日本の中都市にある2つの学校で実施された、生徒の意見を調査するアンケートを研究題材とした。本研究によりEFL教育は非常に重要とみなされているにも関わらず、英語は他の科目に比べて非常に人気が高いことが明らかとなった。生徒はその教育の成果として口頭により英語でコミュニケーションをはかれるようになることを望んでいるにもかかわらず、高等学校入学試験に合格することが一番の関心事となっている。

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In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released an *Action Plan* to improve the English speaking skills of junior high school (JHS) students. However, pressures working within JHS English as a foreign language (EFL) education negate the efforts of MEXT. These pressures include the poor English speaking skills of many Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs), large classes of mixed-leveled students and negative *test impact*<sup>1</sup>. These issues, along with the unpopularity of English amongst students (Honma & Takeshita, 2005) have made JHS EFL a controversial and much debated section of the Japanese education system.

The research conducted in this study can be used by native-English teachers to better understand the current condition of EFL and EFL learners in Japanese JHSs. This has been difficult up to now because many of these teachers are unable to comprehend relevant Japanese research due to insufficient reading skills. In addition, there have been no recent studies in English dedicated to finding out exactly how students view EFL in JHS.

## Research Questions

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. What do students want from Japanese public JHS EFL education?
2. Do students believe that possessing English speaking skills will be beneficial for their future?
3. Do students like English as a JHS subject?

1 *Test impact* is the impact tests have on aspects of education. It negatively affects EFL education at the JHS level because teachers, due to exam pressure, feel obliged to teach students exam relevant information only. In Japan, this usually means speaking skills are ignored.

## Previous Studies

English is *the* foreign language in Japan (Lo-Castro, 1996); however, success in EFL has not been high. In fact, Japan has been considered the *poster child* of first-world nations that have unsuccessful EFL programs (Reesor, 2003, p. 57). The MEXT 2003 *Action Plan* was an attempt to rectify this. It 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 (para 1)." Regarding JHS, "the focus is on cultivating communication abilities in listening and speaking (para 9)." To achieve these goals, students would have to interact with English rather than be passive receivers of grammatical information, a goal that would require JTEs to employ an interactive student-centred style of teaching. However, the main method of instruction in Japanese JHS EFL classrooms remains the teacher-centred, Asian version of grammar-translation: *yakudoku* (Gorsuch, 2000; LoCastro, 1996; Rubrecht, 2004). *Yakudoku* is mainly conducted in Japanese, which gives students insufficient exposure to English to develop any communicative competence (LoCastro, 1996).

Reasons given for *yakudoku* use are (Brown, H., 2000; Gorsuch, 2001; LoCastro, 1996; Rubrecht, 2004):

- Low JTE English proficiency
- Implementation requires few teaching skills
- Fear of making mistakes in English and losing face during lessons
- The simplicity of making and marking tests based on translation

*Test impact* may also promote the use of *yakudoku* either positively or negatively. If assessment matches course goals, objectives, and teaching practice, then the impact is positive. If assessment does not match these factors, it is negative (Brown & Hudson, 1998). Tests are extremely important in JHS, none more so than the senior high school (SHS) entrance examination. This test dictates which schools students can attend and has huge implications for their future. Unfortunately, it negatively affects JHS student English speaking competency because the exam has no oral component (Akiyama, 2003).

It reduces English to a collection of discrete items (Honna et al., 2005), which lowers student motivation to speak in lessons because it is not a relevant test skill.

## Methodology

### Research setting and participants

This research was undertaken in two public JHSs in a mid-sized Japanese city. The participants were the students of the schools and ranged in age from 12 to 15 years old. Japanese JHS students normally receive three 50-minute EFL lessons per week. However, the research location is a *special educational district of English*, one of only 34 such districts in Japan. While the location has no greater need for English than anywhere else, the language was held in high regard by members of the city council. To become a special district of English, city officials must apply to the central Board of Education in Tokyo. The most important outcome of acquiring this status is the placement of a native speaking English teacher in every JHS to provide an additional 50-minute EFL lesson each week, over and above the scheduled 150 minutes.

### Questionnaire development, administration, and analysis

Two focus group sessions involving three JTEs per group were arranged to assist questionnaire item production. A question enquiring about foreign culture and world affairs knowledge was requested by JTEs and added to the item list to show gratitude for their assistance. The item list was sent to a journalist and an EFL professor for analysis. Ambiguous items were highlighted and were either reworded or deleted, leaving the questionnaire with six items. Likert scales were then developed. The traditional *strongly agree... strongly disagree* scale was avoided because the term *strongly* suggests 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). *Completely agree...completely disagree* was used instead, and negative choices were placed on the left end of the scale to reduce bias (Brace, 2004; Bradburn, Sudman, & Wansink, 2004).

To promote comprehension, the questionnaire was translated into Japanese. Translation accuracy was ensured by employing a back-translation method in the following stages:

1. Questionnaire translated from English into Japanese
2. Questionnaire translated back into English using a different translator
3. The English questionnaire from Stage One and the re-translated English questionnaire from Stage Two were compared
4. Non-matching items analyzed and fixed by a third translator

The Japanese questionnaire was given to JTEs to critique and piloted by a JHS English Club to ensure its appropriacy. Following its acceptance by the principals of the two schools, it was printed and distributed to the JHSs (see appendices). At one JHS, all students completed the questionnaire during class. In the other school, administration was done at JTE discretion. 337

completed student questionnaires were received. Results were statistically analyzed to identify meaningful results.

## Findings and discussion

Students selected their three most important school subjects. These selections were calculated to provide the *subject importance ranking* shown in Figure 1. To determine subject popularity, students ranked their favourite subjects from one to nine, one being their favourite. Only the top-three ranked subjects were considered, as these were the ones students would be most adamant about. To calculate the subject popularity selection, numbers were inverted (i.e., a selection of one had a true value of nine points). The finding that English was a very unpopular subject in JHS supported the 2005 MEXT survey mentioned previously (Honma, et al., 2005). Reasons for the unpopularity of English could be:

- A lack of variety, creativity, or physical movement (probable motivational factors)

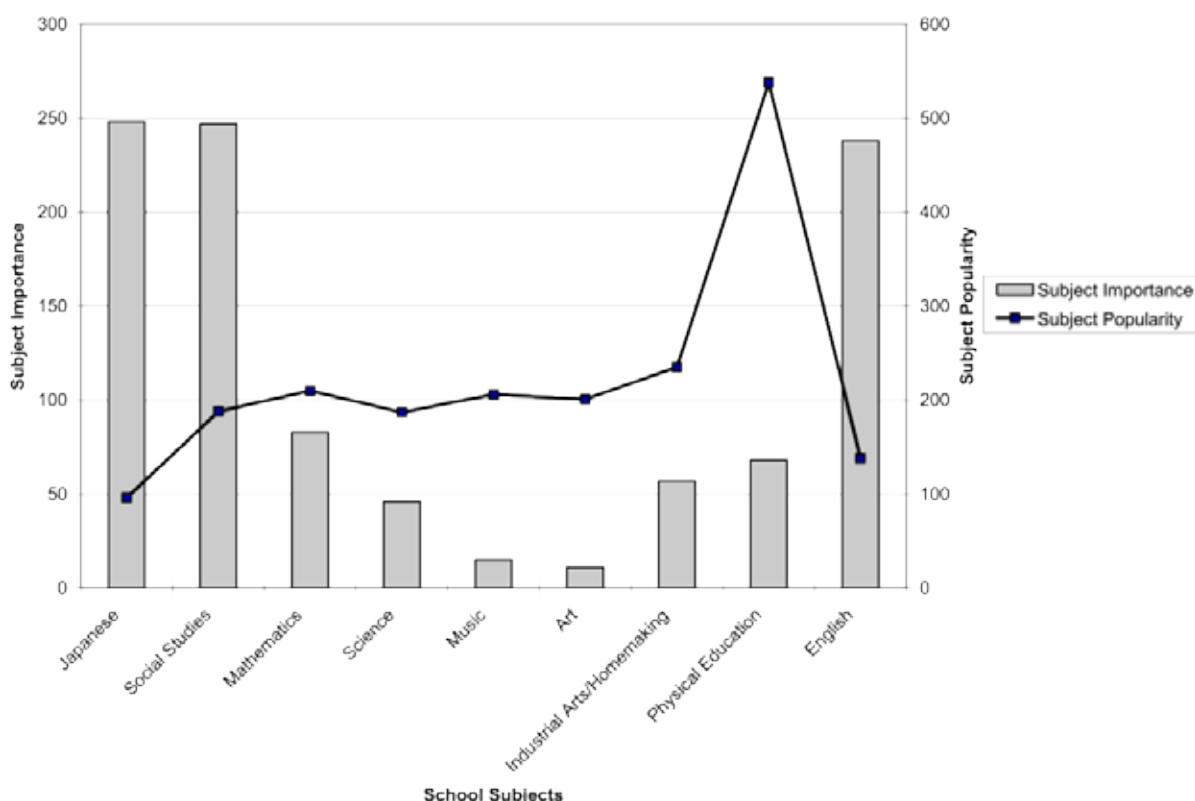


Figure 1. JHS subject popularity and importance ranking

for this specific age group) found in other subjects, such as art or physical education

- Negative attitudes towards English borne through the belief that English is only a necessary evil in scholastic advancement
- *Yakudoku* use

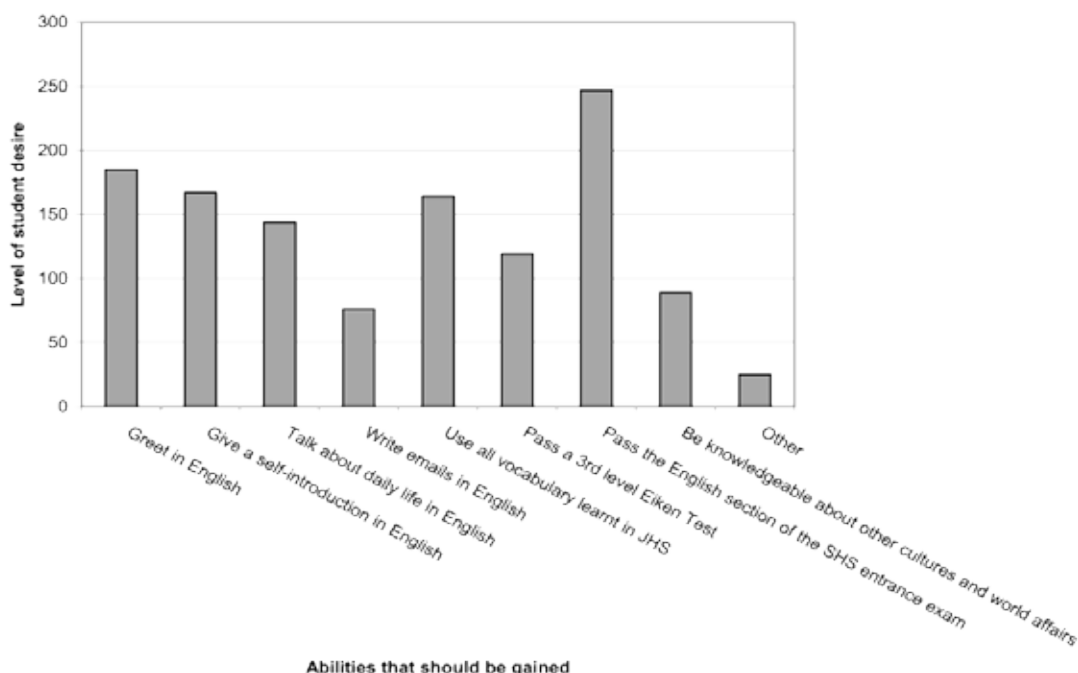
English, ranked within the top three most important subjects and not far below the top subject (Japanese), was a significant finding. It is likely that this importance ranking was boosted by the fact that English is a prominent part of the SHS entrance examination. This point complements the findings shown in figure 2 below. In gathering this data, students were asked to choose as many options as they wished in the item regarding the abilities wanted from JHS EFL education. They were also asked to write any additional desired skills. Each selection was calculated to provide the *level of student desire*.

The importance of passing the SHS entrance examination was certainly evident. At this point in a student's schooling, it is not surprising that students value assessed skills above non-assessed ones in this extremely important exam

since students who cannot enter a good SHS will probably not attend university. In Japan, this usually means a future of low paying, menial employment. Three of the four next favoured skills involved speaking, yet the gap between them and passing the SHS entrance exam was significant.

Students demonstrated little interest in world affairs and foreign cultures-- perhaps they were too busy with the present to be concerned about something so seemingly distant. The desire to use all taught English vocabulary must be considered an untenable expectation given the small amount of time dedicated to EFL and the demands of other subjects. However, this demonstrated an active attitude toward language learning where the language is used rather than stored. Students also wanted to learn how to greet, give self-introductions, and talk about daily life. These points related directly to the MEXT JHS EFL goal mandate. However, talking about daily life is multi-leveled, so it is uncertain which level of speech students were advocating.

The majority of students (37.4%) chose *don't know* as their response in regards to JHS EFL



**Figure 2. Abilities students want to gain from JHS EFL education**

focus, 34.3% felt EFL should have an academic focus, and 28.3% answered that it should *not* have an academic focus. It is likely that more academically focused students selected the need for a more studious approach to EFL as they were probably more motivated in entering a good SHS and thus appreciated anything assisting that end. Because students did not indicate which JHS grade they were in when completing the questionnaire, one could speculate that this division could have also been between the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade students, who would have been more aware of the EFL requirements of the SHS entrance examinations, and the students of the lower grades. Regardless of which theory is most accurate, the disparity between student views regarding EFL lesson focus shows one of the difficulties that JTEs must face in keeping their students satisfied and focused during lessons.

Just over 50% of the students believed they would need English speaking skills in the future, while approximately 20% did not (Table 1).

**Table 1. Students need English speaking skills for the future**

Response Options	Response Rates
Completely disagree	17
Generally disagree	41
Don't know	84
Generally agree	120
Completely agree	25

What is unfortunately not clear in Table 1 was how students defined *future*. It is possible that in the eyes of some students, it meant nothing beyond the entrance examinations rather than life after study, which would have boosted affirmative selections. However, half of the additional written comments involved either the ability to communicate with foreigners or being able to live in an English speaking country, indicating that many students defined *future* as sometime after their SHS entrance exams.

## Conclusion

Students regarded JHS EFL education as being very important, deviating from suggestions made by scholars such as Guest (2006), who stated that Japanese people consider English unimportant because Japan has a “geographic, linguistic and psychological distance from the English-speaking world” and the belief that speaking English might somehow dilute a person’s *Japaneseness* (p. 14). However, Guest’s theory is worth considering because it is possible that the JHS EFL importance ratings presented here were influenced by the SHS entrance examinations. English is a major part of these exams, and passing them was paramount to the students.

There appears to be little debate on the unpopularity of English, which is probably the result of the *yakudoku* teaching methodology more than anything else, though it may also be unpopular with some students because it does not seem to be a practical subject for their lives beyond formal education. Nevertheless, most students believed that English speaking skills would be important in the future, though *the future* can be a relative thing. Some students may have viewed it as the looming SHS entrance examinations. The divide between whether EFL should be taught academically or for communicative purposes in JHS was plainly evident, a possible indicator of test impact. Entry into SHS is an extremely important period in Japanese life, so it is natural that JHS students strongly focused on academic advancement will gravitate towards English skills which are assessed, thus rendering speaking skills a victim of negative test impact.

## Avenues for further research

This research has revealed details on JHS student views regarding EFL tuition in a mid-sized Japanese city. As a future extension, the data here could be compared with that from a larger, more international city, such as Kobe, Osaka, or Tokyo. This research should incorporate a greater number of participants, which would raise the study’s significance. In this study, the relatively small number of subjects could be seen as a limitation. Research in the future could also endeavour to establish why English is seen as important to JHS students and focus on how

the SHS entrance examinations affect this view. Reasons behind EFL's unpopularity should be investigated, as this probably adversely affects learning motivation.

To gather the more subjective data suggested above, a more thorough, lengthy questionnaire that allows for elaboration should be used. While some participants in this study wrote additional information on their questionnaires, a designated comments section for each question may have provided a lot more significant, rich information to supplement the statistical data. An item asking students to detail the need for English speaking skills in the future could have provided English learning motivation insight and more test impact evidence. Another obvious drawback was the fact that Likert scales do not indicate conviction, meaning that two responses may be identical yet their sentiment may vary in strength.

No change in policy or shift in teaching method will result from this research alone. A more appropriate goal would be an attitudinal shift in the target audience, the native English speakers employed as EFL teachers in Japanese JHSs. Hopefully, after reading this article, members of this group will more clearly understand and appreciate JHS student attitudes towards EFL. It is hoped this research may also foster greater empathy in native speaking EFL teachers towards JTEs, which may then support the development of shared beliefs and goals.

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\_\_\_ 数学                      \_\_\_ 技術・家庭  
\_\_\_ 理科                      \_\_\_ 英語  
\_\_\_ 音楽

4. 英語は将来話せるようになるために勉強するというより、教科の1つとして学ばばよい。

全くそう 思わな い	そうは 思わな い	分から ない	そう思う	強くそう 思う
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## Appendix A

### Administered Student Questionnaire

生徒用

- あなたの率直な御意見をお聞かせ下さい。
- すべての質問にお答え下さい。
- 下記の答えから一番当てはまるものに○印を1つだけつけて下さい。

全くそう 思わな い	そうは 思わな い	分から ない	そう思う	強くそう 思う
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1. 次の中学校の教科を好きな順に1から9まで番号をつけてください。

\_\_\_ 国語                      \_\_\_ 美術  
\_\_\_ 数学                      \_\_\_ 技術・家庭  
\_\_\_ 社会                      \_\_\_ 体育  
\_\_\_ 理科                      \_\_\_ 英語  
\_\_\_ 音楽

2. 将来、英語で話せるようになる必要がある。

全くそう思 わない	そうは思わ ない	そう思う	強くそう 思う
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3. 中学校の教科の中で、自分の学習で特に重要だと思うもの3つに○をつけてください。

\_\_\_ 国語                      \_\_\_ 美術  
\_\_\_ 社会                      \_\_\_ 体育

5. 中学校3年間の授業を受けて、できるようになりたいことは何ですか。あてはまるものをつけてください。いくつでもかまいません。

- 英語で挨拶
- 英語で自己紹介
- 英語で自分の日常生活についての会話
- 英語でメールを送る
- 学んだ言葉を使って文章を書く
- 英検3級に合格する
- 高校の入学試験に合格する
- 外国の文化や世界の出来事に関心を持つ
- その他(説明してください)
- \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix B

### Student Questionnaire in English (not administered)

- Please answer using your honest opinions.
- Please try to answer all questions.
- When answering the Likert Scales please circle in the box that is true for you. Circle only one box per question.

For example

Com- pletely disagree	Generally disagree	Generally agree	Com- pletely agree
-----------------------------	-----------------------	--------------------	--------------------------

1. Please rank the junior high school subjects in the order in which you like them (from 1~9, 1 being the subject that you like the most)

\_\_\_\_ Japanese                      \_\_\_\_ Art  
 \_\_\_\_ Social Studies              \_\_\_\_ Mathematics  
 \_\_\_\_ Industrial Arts/Homemaking  
 \_\_\_\_ Physical Education          \_\_\_\_ Science  
 \_\_\_\_ English                        \_\_\_\_ Music

2. I will need to be able to speak English in the future

Com- pletely disagree	Generally disagree	Generally agree	Com- pletely agree
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3. Please choose the 3 subjects that you think are most important

\_\_\_\_ Japanese                      \_\_\_\_ Art  
 \_\_\_\_ Social Studies              \_\_\_\_ Mathematics  
 \_\_\_\_ Industrial Arts/Homemaking  
 \_\_\_\_ Physical Education          \_\_\_\_ Science  
 \_\_\_\_ English                        \_\_\_\_ Music

4. I should learn English as an academic subject rather than for future communication

Com- pletely disa- gree	Gener- ally disa- gree	Don't know	Gener- ally agree	Com- pletely agree
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5. After completing 3 years of English lessons in Junior High School, what do you want to be able to do? Please check as many boxes as you want. *For example:*

- greet in English
- give a self-introduction in English
- have a conversation about his/her life in English
- write emails in English
- use all vocabulary learnt in composition
- pass a 3<sup>rd</sup> level Eiken Test
- pass the English section of the High School entrance examination
- have a good knowledge in foreign cultures & world affairs
- other (please explain)
- \_\_\_\_\_

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