



# Changes to Elementary School Education

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**AJET**

# Changes to Elementary School Education

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current elementary school Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) were surveyed in relation to some of the proposed upcoming changes to elementary school education, as announced last year by the Japanese government.

This report shows that in general, ALTs support the idea of beginning elementary school education earlier than the current system, but many also noted that a number of other changes would be necessary to ensure the success of this plan and of the change from Foreign Language Activities to English as an official subject for the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grades.

The key to this success, according to ALTs, appears to be more training for Japanese Home Room Teachers (HRTs), in both English and team-teaching, in order to build their confidence and that of their students. Although curriculum and textbook content were not considered to be as critical in the success of English as an official subject, many survey respondents took the time to mention the inclusion of phonics and of English words/text within the textbooks as important factors to ensure that students learn English in a meaningful way and as a foundation for their English education later in junior high school.

In addition, many ALTs feel that an increased presence of ALTs in the classroom would be highly beneficial in implementing the changes to English education, with a vast majority believing that their current level of involvement (on a weekly/monthly basis) with elementary school classes is insufficient for them to make a significant impact on the English education of their students. Instead, they recommended an increase in the number of ALTs and/or different scheduling to allow for more frequent visits with each elementary school class.



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# INTRODUCTION

In response to a number of potential changes and ideas proposed at the previous Opinion Exchange meeting in December 2013, the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) was keen to know how current JET Programme participants felt about the proposals. As such, the spring survey was designed to follow up on these potential changes and collect feedback from JET participants that may help to guide the direction of the upcoming changes.

Specifically, AJET heard at the Opinion Exchange meeting about the new reforms taking place in education, as announced by the government in December 2013. The new plan for education will implement significant changes to English education to coincide with the Tokyo Olympics in 2020, including 2 major changes at the elementary school level:

1. English education at elementary school will begin in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade, with 'Foreign language activities'.
2. For elementary school 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades, English will be taught as a subject in 3 lessons per week.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recognises the need to train teachers, including ALTs, in order to implement this new model by 2020 and AJET believes that the results of this survey, as presented in this report, may be able to provide valuable guidance in this area.

# METHODOLOGY

The data used in this report come from a survey conducted by the Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching (AJET) over the period 1–18 April 2014. This survey was distributed to JET Programme participants using an online survey development tool. The number of questions depended on the job type of the respondent: 49 for Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs), and 11 for Coordinators for International Relations (CIRs) and Sports Exchange Advisors (SEAs). The formats used included 'Yes' or 'No', multiple choice and open-ended questions. This survey was implemented in English.

The survey was divided into four key areas:

- Changes to elementary school English
- English-speaking coordinators in schools
- ALTs as solo educators
- Review of AJETs services

For ease of use, a separate report has been developed for each of these four key areas. This report presents the findings in relation to the changes to elementary school English, providing an assessment of survey results for each section and an analysis of the responses. The results presented in this report with regard to current JET Programme participants include both participants on their first appointment with the Programme and those on their second or more. All percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

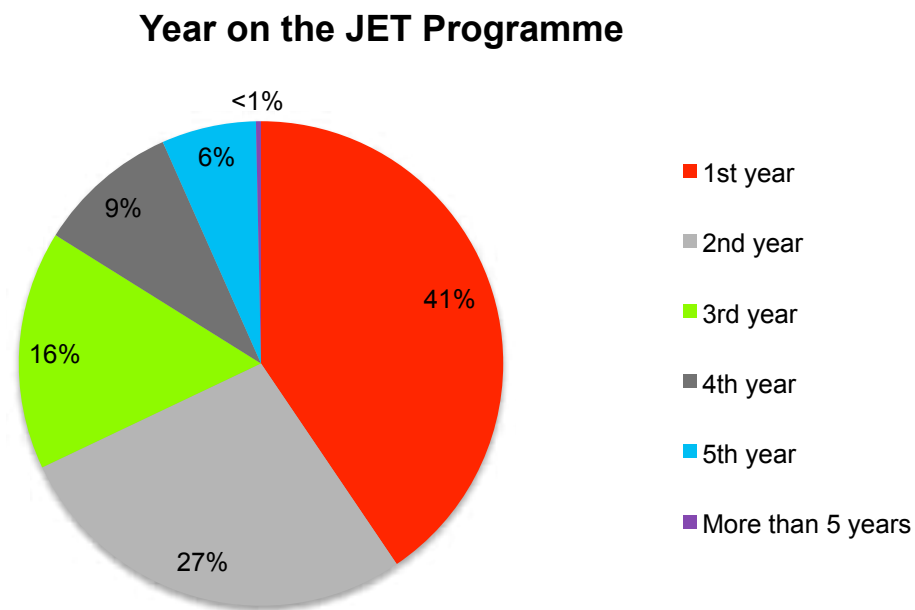
Throughout the report, the following abbreviations will be used for the common terms used in relation to the JET Programme:

- ALT: Assistant Language Teacher
- CIR: Coordinator for International Relations
- SEA: Sports Exchange Advisor
- JET: Japan Exchange and Teaching (Programme)
- AJET: The Association for Japan Exchange and Teaching

## Survey Sample

The survey collected responses from a total of 1135 JET Programme participants, or approximately 26% of the total current JET Programme population in Japan. Of these, a large portion indicated that they did not teach at elementary schools, so their data has been excluded from the analysis presented in this report, leaving a sample size of 602 respondents, or 14% of the JET population. All of these 602 respondents currently works as an ALT on the JET Programme.

In terms of how long the 602 respondents have been on the JET Programme, the largest proportion identified themselves as being in their first year (41%), with second- and third-year participants the next most populous groups (27% and 16%, respectively). The graph below shows the complete breakdown of respondents by year on the JET Programme.



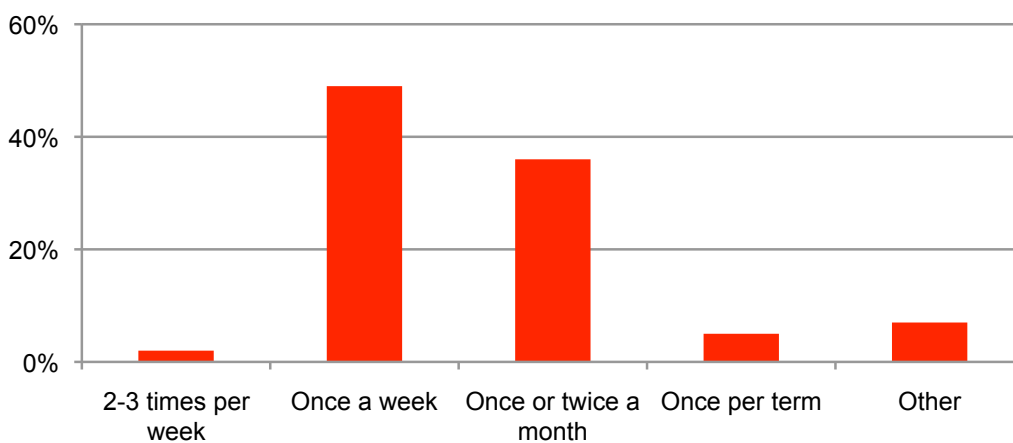
*Note:* Although the maximum JET Programme tenure is 5 years, 'More than 5 years' is used to denote JET participants who have a combined total of more than 5 years over 2 or more separate appointments. With such a small sample size for these participants, their results have been left out of most graphs within the report.

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## Current Level of Involvement of ALTs at Elementary Schools

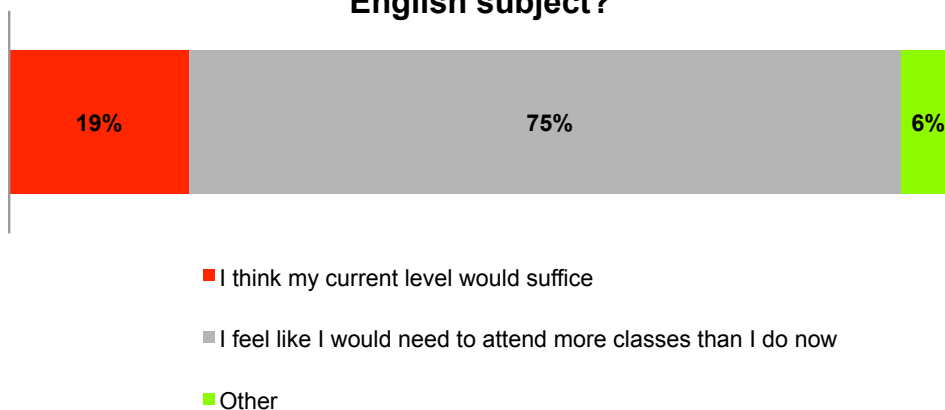
Of the JET participants who responded to the survey, more than half (58%) currently teach at the elementary school (ES) level. Of these, nearly all respondents teach the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades (96% and 97% of ES teachers respectively), with over 70% teaching grades 1-4. When asked how often on average they see each of their 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade classes, the most common response was 'once a week' (49% of respondents), followed by 'once or twice a month' (36%). Around 6% of respondents indicated that they attend each 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade class on average once a term or less frequently.

**How often do you see each 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade class on average?**



When asked about whether they felt their current level of involvement in 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade classes would suffice when English becomes an official subject, three quarters (75%) of respondents felt that they would need to attend more classes than they do now to play a key supporting role in the process; less than 20% of respondents felt that their current level of involvement would suffice.

**Do you feel your current level of involvement will suffice to play a key supporting role in the new English subject?**



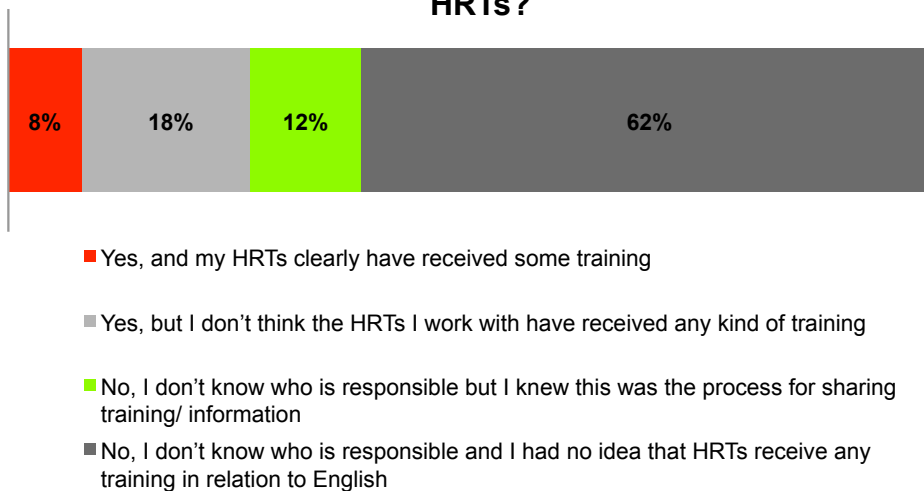


This result was generally the same regardless of the level of current involvement (e.g. once a week versus once a term). That is, no matter how often ALTs currently visit their 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade classes, the majority feel that to make a real impact in English classes they would need to attend more than they do now.

## Training for Home-room Teachers

Over half of the respondents (59%) indicated that they know who the lead/head English teacher at their ES is, with first-year JET participants having the lowest level of knowledge about this (51%). However, almost three quarters (74%) of respondents do not know who is responsible for passing on English-related training and information to all relevant home-room teachers (HRTs). A small proportion of these respondents admitted that they knew this was the process for sharing training/ information, even though they did not know exactly who was responsible. However the remainder (62% of the overall survey sample) had no idea that HRTs received any training in relation to English. By contrast, of the respondents who know who is responsible for disseminating the training/information in their schools, less than 30% actually believe that this training is being carried out.

### Do you know who is responsible for passing on English-related training/information to all relevant HRTs?

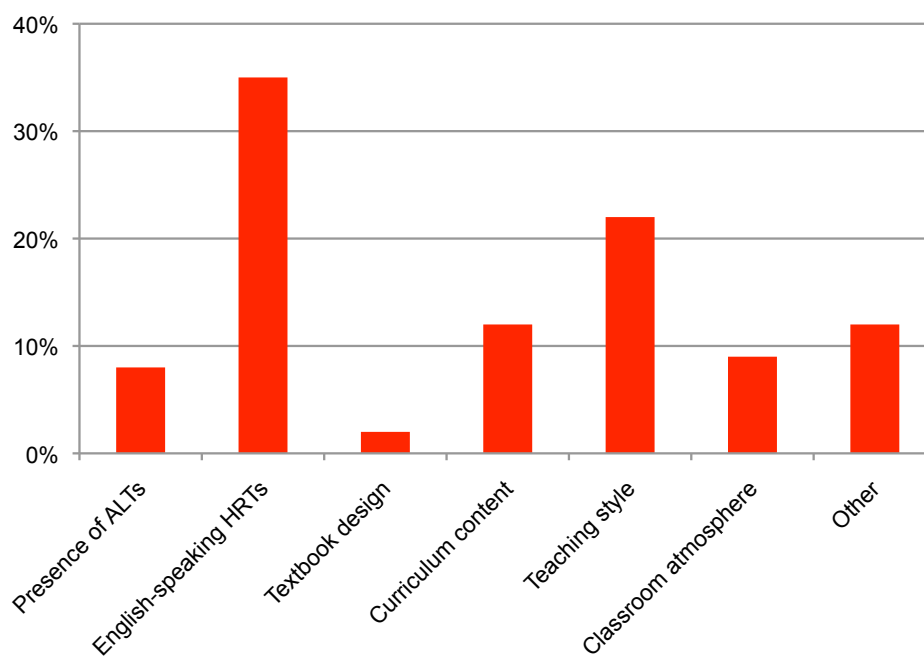


These results indicate that although there is a formal process to disseminate English-related information and training to HRTs, many JET participants are under the impression that the HRTs they work with in fact receive no training at all, which suggests that perhaps the current system is not working effectively.

## Critical Success Factors for English Education

Respondents were also asked to consider the single most critical factor determining the success (or otherwise) when the new English course of study is implemented for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades.

### When English becomes an official subject for 5<sup>th</sup>/ 6<sup>th</sup> grades, what do you think will be the most critical factor in its success?



As shown in the graph above, the most common response, provided by 35% of respondents, was 'English-speaking HRTs), with the next most prevalent responses being 'Teaching style' (22%), Curriculum (12%) and Other (12%). In fact, most of the 'Other' responses listed a combination of factors and stated that there was no single factor that would be the key to success in the absence of the others. Interestingly, the 'Presence of ALTs' was only seen to be the most critical factor by 8% of respondents. Thus, although most ALTs feel they would need to be present in more classes to play a key supporting role in English education at the 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade level, this 'supporting role' is not seen to be as critical as the ability for HRTs to speak (some) English from the perspective of current elementary school ALTs.

## Suggestions from Current ALTs

Respondents to the survey provided a large number of specific suggestions regarding the additional training, support or materials they thought would be necessary to support the introduction of the new English course of study for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades. As illustrated above, for a majority of ALTs, training, in terms of both English and team-teaching, is what needs to be addressed first to ensure the success of English education at the elementary school level. In order to motivate the students to speak English, many believe that the HRTs should demonstrate their own English ability and show confidence doing so:

*"[Japanese] teachers need more support to gain confidence in their own English level. Teachers are sometimes very open with students that they feel their English skills are insufficient and I feel this is detrimental to the students [sic] confidence. So building teachers [sic] confidence (by providing more training specific to the textbooks/curriculum) should help improve the students [sic] confidence."*

*“Training courses on effective team teaching would be helpful for both ALTs and HRTs. Building the confidence of HRTs is key.”*

*“Teachers should receive additional support and, if needed, training. They need to understand that it is not about their English ability, but their enthusiasm. Most HRT’s [sic] who struggle with English lessons have a problem with confidence more than anything.”*

However, a number of respondents suggested that in order to foster that confidence in the HRTs, the training should start at the university level, before they become full time teachers:

*“I think it starts at the university level. Every student that wants to become a primary school teacher should be trained and tested in their English ability. It’s as simple as that. If you want everyone to be as good at English as they are at Maths [sic], give English the same amount of attention as you give Maths [sic]. Making English an official subject is exactly what needed to happen. To ensure the success of this, train your teachers from the very beginning of their studies at university in English.”*

As for the curriculum, teaching phonics was a recurrent suggestion from many respondents:

*“Focus on pronunciation (phonics). 5th and 6th graders should be learning proper pronunciation to lead into the formal study they’ll do in JHS. Katakana English through JHS and into HS is a serious embarrassment on English education.”*

*“Phonics, as early as possible. There are simply sounds in foreign language that are not present in standard Japanese, and the earlier students learn to make these unusual sounds, the easier it will be for them to ignore the incorrect pronunciations used by the older people around them. Students will be surrounded for decades by peers and teachers who, despite their best efforts, use katakana pronunciations of words. They must be aware, and capable of making the sounds their elders can’t, in order to make progress from one generation to the next.”*

*“Don’t be afraid of phonemes and phonics. If students can be taught the sounds of English and then the different ways those sounds are expressed in English writing they can not only improve their performance but also manage the increased vocabulary of JH and HS English without depending on blunt force memorization.”*

*“Phonics, phonics, phonics. The children need to be exposed to English phonics as soon as possible, so they can learn to pronounce the language in bite-size chunks that they can handle rather than in full sentences like we currently expect them to. Also, once they begin learning to read in junior high, they have to memorize each word by meaning AND spelling, without the tools to sound words out like English-speaking children learn in elementary school. The lack of phonics is a KEY WEAKNESS [emphasis in original text] in the current system.”*

In order to implement these changes and strengthen the curriculum, the need to change the current format of the elementary school textbooks was highly stressed. Respondents gave the following suggestions:

*“The current Elementary Textbooks [sic] contain a severely minimal amount of English. If we expect the students to learn the language, they need the opportunity to actively see and work with the words they are being taught. A large majority of language learning is experimentation; if the students are to learn, they must be given the chance to write and read in English, as well as build their own sentences. The lack of phonetics materials is also an issue. While it is expected that the ALT’s [sic] can provide this practice, the HRT’s [sic] have very little practice in how to pronounce words. The addition of phonetics materials will not only assist the ALT’s [sic] in teaching, but it can help build the HRT’s [sic] English teaching skills as well.”*

*“Make sure that lessons are cumulative so that the students must continue practicing previously learned material.”*

*“Scaffold the lessons. Don’t jump around from topic to random topic. If the lessons build on each other and require the students to use prior information, they will be more likely to make connections between old information and new information and retain what they are learning.”*

Many ALTs did agree that, despite the need to better train the HRTs before such measures can be implemented, the idea of increasing the number of English classes as well as starting English education earlier at the elementary school level is a step in the right direction:

*"I think starting English education at a younger age is the best possible way for Japanese students to seriously learn the language. If possible, I would try to start English education (at least basic-level English) for all students at the 1st and 2nd grade levels."*

*"It is difficult to have any real progress made with English education at elementary school without at least a weekly lesson to allow students to familiarize themselves with the language without forgetting everything."*

*"Many children don't retain the English they learn in the classroom because they don't consider it important. When class is only once a week, does not get tested, and does not require any study, of course children will forget about it. Perhaps if the kids could be better convinced of the importance of English or if something could inspire more interest in the language, they would improve."*

In accordance with the fact that more than 80% of the respondents considered their current level of involvement insufficient to apply the proposed changes, the number of schools per ALT seems to be one of the main issues:

*"Some ALTs, myself included, have so many schools that it's very difficult to make an impact on English education. Fewer schools, so that we can attend more classes, would increase our impact and make us far more effective."*

*"With this change, I'm sure each school will basically need their own ALT as opposed to one ALT for several schools. So integration into the staff is more of an important factor here. So there probably has to be some serious training for ALTs before they start their job, more than what happens now. A 2-3 week camp during that boring month of August would be a good starting point."*

Overall, the suggestions indicated a general feeling that the key role in making English accessible to elementary school students should be held by the HRTs. In order to help them fulfill that role, they should be provided with the proper training and resources as well as more frequent opportunities to have an ALT in the classroom.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the most part, survey respondents agreed with the changes proposed by MEXT; that increasing the number of classes at the elementary school level and starting English education in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, as opposed to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, are good ideas in theory, but they did express that these changes could not be applied without an overhaul of the current English education system. The principal issues highlighted by the survey results are the current training of HRTs, the content of the mandatory textbooks as well as the responsibilities of elementary school ALTs. It is recommended that additional training be provided for current HRTs, but also that the next cohort of HRTs be trained in English education prior to graduating from university.

In addition, this report recommends that the textbooks should include phonics material and that lessons should be cumulative, so that previously learned material continues to be used and built upon as the curriculum progresses. This would help to ensure a smooth transition between English education at the various levels of elementary school and beyond, to junior high school.

Many survey respondents felt that their current involvement at each elementary school would not be sufficient for them to have a significant (positive) impact once the number of weekly English lessons is increased and the main solution to this issue would be to reduce the number of schools each ALT is required to visit and/or increase the frequency of visits. Therefore, if the proposed changes were to be carried out, there could be a need for more ALTs at the elementary school level.

