

# japan times forum on elementary school english teaching

Questions remain as once-a-week compulsory 'foreign-language activities' lessons are set to start this spring for Japan's fifth and sixth graders

## Experts weigh import of elementary school English

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SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Debate lingers on whether English education is truly necessary for children in Japan despite the imminent start of compulsory English teaching at public elementary schools. But the participants at a recent panel discussion sounded cautiously optimistic about the fate of the landmark project.

Most of about 25,000 public elementary schools across Japan have introduced foreign-language education, mainly English, during a three-year experimental period. This will be followed by once-a-week compulsory lessons set to start for fifth and sixth graders at the beginning of fiscal 2011 this April. English teaching will be introduced in the form of "foreign-language activities," not as a formal curriculum with evaluations given for pupils.

English education at public schools in Japan starts from the junior high school level, but there are few countries in neighboring areas and other parts of the world that start public English education at so late an age, said a university professor invited to join the panel discussion. If the situation is not addressed, "Japan will be further left behind in the current trend toward globalization," he said.

Organized by The Japan Times, the panel discussion was attended by Kazuhiro Nakai, director of the International Education Division of the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), and three advocates of English teaching for small children. They were Kensaku Yoshida, a professor of Sophia University, Kaz Yatsugi, chairman of the Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children (JASTEC), and Ann Mayeda, a lecturer at Konan Women's University of Kobe and a former member of the Board of Directors of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). Keisuke Okada, former managing editor of The Japan Times, served as the moderator.

Their discussion is as follows:

**Moderator:** The planned English teaching at public elementary schools is drawing attention not just from interested domestic parties but also from foreign countries. This panel discussion is very timely, I think, because it is meaningful to correctly tell foreign people what is happening at Japanese elementary schools. Mr. Nakai, could you explain the history of discussions at the government's related councils that have led to the start of English teaching at public elementary schools?

**Kazuhiro Nakai:** Activities in various parts of Japanese society have become global and as a result, requests have increased in recent years that public schools will strive to foster children interested in foreign languages, especially English. Following the Central Education Council's recommendations for studying the possibility of introducing foreign-language activities at public elementary schools, we started revising the "course of study," the teaching guidelines for elementary schools in 2008. Some schools have started English teaching as part of cur-



Kazuhiro Nakai

ricula for the "integrated studies" classes, but there has been a disparity in the progress of English teaching from school to school or from area to area. When we started revising the related systems and policies, we paid attention to how to provide equal opportunities in English education to children, and how to ensure smooth relations between elementary schools and junior high schools in their English-teaching programs. The forthcoming English teaching at elementary schools is not aimed at front-loading part of English lessons at junior high schools. It is aimed at laying the groundwork for elementary school pupils to learn the English language while getting them interested in English, and making them familiar with basic pronunciations and expressions.

**Kensaku Yoshida:** Japan has made efforts for many decades in English education from the junior high school to university levels, but the English skills of Japanese students remain generally poor. If their English skills must be improved, a new approach should be considered. Some people call for increasing the periods for English teaching at junior high schools, but I don't think this would solve anything. The increased periods for English education, if any, would be used for students to better prepare for high school entrance exams, rather than improving their communication skills in English. A certain special English-teaching project for senior high schools has contributed to fostering many students who can speak English fluently. The project has also enabled many educators to teach in English. But when they become third graders, their English classes suddenly change to lessons to prepare for university en-



Kensaku Yoshida

trance exams. It will be difficult to truly improve the English skills of Japanese students within the current framework. In the meantime, there is no need to think about preparations for entrance exams for elementary school children. They can have an opportunity to truly enjoy English for communication and experience various activities by using the English language. The elementary school age is the most appropriate time to nurture children's motivations to learn English and cultivate their sense of the language, I think. Of course, we have to think about specific issues such as whether the fifth and sixth grades are an appropriate age to start, and whether the frequency of English teaching should be increased from once a week. But we have to move forward toward a first step anyway.

**Kaz Yatsugi:** We at JASTEC have persistently proposed introducing English teaching at public elementary schools, adopting appeals to this end in 1995 and 2004. We proposed from the beginning that English teaching should start from the first grade, but the forthcoming English-teaching system starts at the fifth and sixth grades. This age is perhaps the hardest period in the elementary school age for people who handle children, I think. English teaching can be continued smoothly for pupils who learned English from the first grade, but those who started at a later age tend to dislike English. But this time, I understand that English teaching will be introduced as a compulsory education and if so, an attitude to listen to English is expected to emerge among these pupils, too, in view of the results of English teaching at pilot schools in the past 20 years.



Kazuyo Yatsugi

**Yoshida:** Attention focuses on how English education at junior and senior high schools will change after compulsory English teaching starts at elementary schools. If the situation does not change and if the English skills of Japanese students remain poor even after graduating from university, then people may ask, "What was the purpose of English teaching for elementary school children anyway?" Some people understand the introduction of English teaching at elementary schools is a problem that concerns only elementary schools, but this is wrong. English teaching at elementary schools must be a starting point for Japan's integrated English education. By introducing English teaching at elementary schools, English education at junior and senior high schools must also change. English teaching at elementary schools will serve as a test of the significance of Japan's English-language education as a whole, I think.

**Yatsugi:** The start of the compulsory English teaching at elementary schools is of great significance, but people actually engaged in English teaching for children are faced with such problems as a lack of fully trained English teachers. There is also a legal barrier that bars classroom teachers from consulting with natives as assistant language teachers, or ALTs, in certain cases. Classroom teachers are definitely good with children, and they have an ability to lure children into learning something. So, a guideline should be given to teachers specifically showing them what to teach and how to teach it.

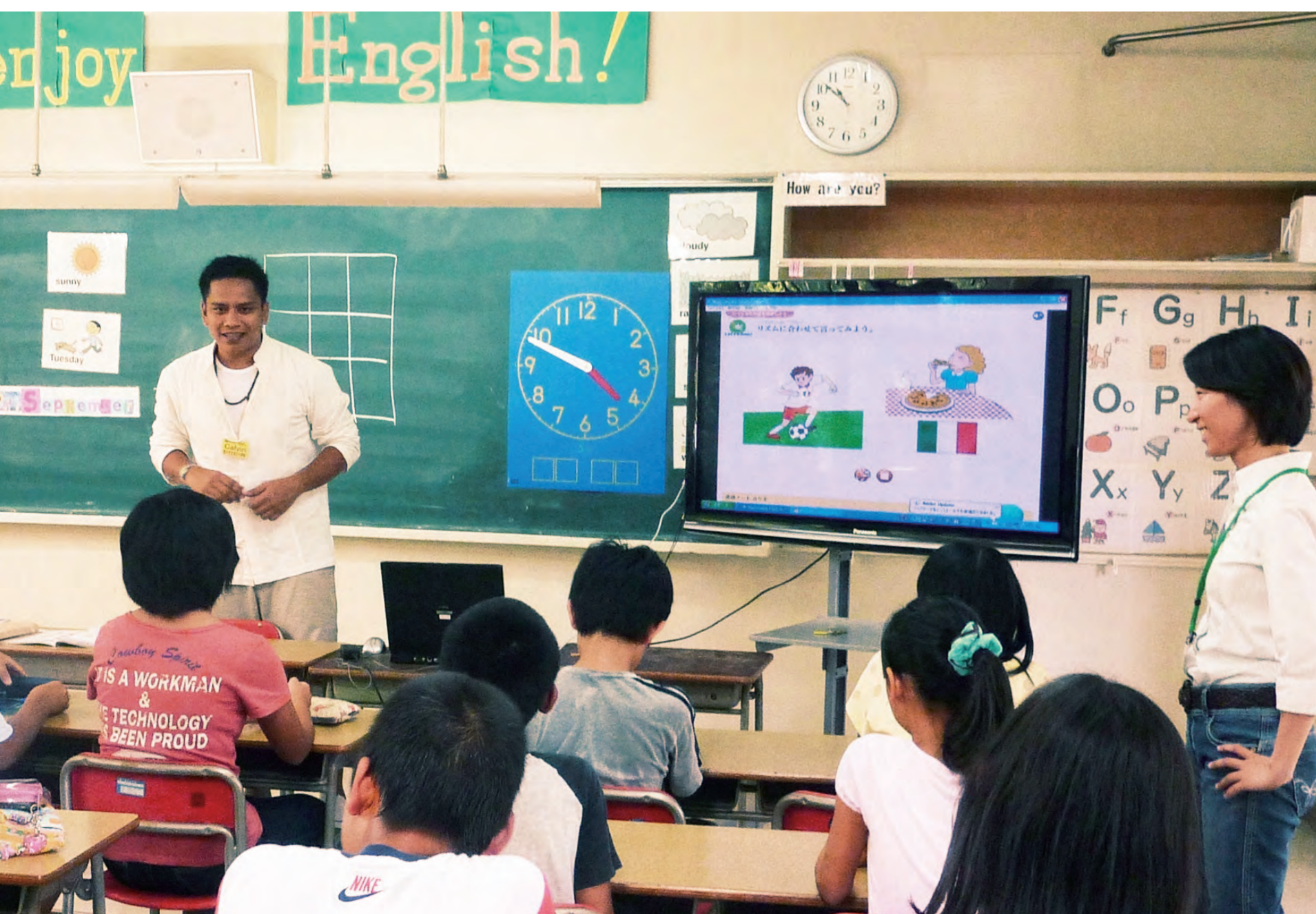
**Ann Mayeda:** I have been involved in the English program at a particular public elementary school since classes began there in 2000. This school began English lessons from the third grade every week over 10 years ago as a part of their integrated studies classes because the then principal expected English to become a compulsory subject in elementary schools in the near future. The current school staff has been discussing what to do with the English curriculum for fifth and sixth graders under the new system. Should they keep their existing program "as is" or should they inte-



Ann Mayeda

grate their curricula from grade 3 to segue into the new compulsory program? The existing program is quite dependent on teaching by ALTs (assistant language teachers), one of whom is a JET (the Japan Exchange and Teaching program administered by the nonprofit Council of Local Authorities for International Relations in cooperation with central government departments concerned and local government organizations) assigned to the local junior high school. Beginning in April, the JET ALT will be assigned to all four local elementary schools and the junior high school in the area, making it difficult to have an ALT in all the classes. This situation was somewhat remedied when the local board of education secured more ALTs for all the elementary schools in preparation for the new school year. The school administration and teachers then began discussions on what to do with "Eigo Note," the officially prepared course material for unified English teaching. They feared that the material would be too easy for the students who have had weekly lessons since grade 3. In the end, they have decided to use "Eigo Note," as it is sanctioned by the ministry and there is pressure to adhere to the material that prepares the students for the English that is taught in junior high school.

Another issue at this school has been its excessive dependency on ALTs to conduct all the classes. While the classroom teachers should eventually lead the English classes, the current school environment has done little to foster this. Many years of ALT-led classes have resulted in complacent homeroom teachers. In addition, the ALTs also have their own hurdles. Many, if not most, ALTs do not have a clear picture of the goals of the compulsory English activities. It has been difficult for them to understand and see how the homeroom teachers can undertake what they have been doing for quite some time. This can be attributed in part to a lack of communication between ALTs and school staff. But we must also remember that it also took quite some time for most school officials and classroom teachers to fully understand the new course of study, CONTINUED ON PAGE 11



Teaching collaboration: Calvin Silva de los Reyes (center, standing), a 30-year-old Filipino part-time researcher at the state-run Osaka University, teaches English to fifth grade students at a public elementary school in Toyonaka City, Osaka Prefecture, in collaboration with Keiko Amano (extreme right, standing), an English teacher at a local public junior high school. Reyes is serving as a gsupporterh for English teaching at the elementary school at the request of the Toyonaka Association of Intercultural Activities and Communication. KYODO PHOTO

## Profiles of Japan Times forum participants

**Kazuhiro Nakai:** Nakai joined the Foreign Ministry in April 1985. After serving at the Japanese embassies in Britain, Cambodia, Canada and Pakistan, he assumed such positions as director of the Biological and Chemical Weapons Conventions Division of the Arms Control and Disarmament Division of the Foreign Policy Bureau, and director of the Cultural Exchange Division of the Public Relations and Cultural Exchange Division of the Ministers Secretariat. Since July 2009, he has been director of the International Education Division of the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology.

**Kensaku Yoshida:** Born in Kyoto, Yoshida graduated from the Graduate School of Foreign Studies at Sophia University and the Graduate School of Michigan State University. As a professor of the Department of English Language and Studies, Sophia University, he is director of the university's Center for the Teaching of Foreign Languages in General Education and the Sophia Linguistic Institute for International Communication. Yoshida has been involved in various research programs related to the MEXT-initiated project to "foster Japanese capable of using English" and chairs MEXT's special study group for

the improvement of foreign language capabilities.

**Kazuyo Yatsugi:** Yatsugi, who formerly taught English at St. Cecilia Elementary School in Kanagawa Prefecture for many years, is president of the Japan Association for the Study of English to Children (JASTEC). Yatsugi is also director of the Institute for Research in Language Teaching (GOKEN) and CISV Japan (former International Trustee for CISV Japan) while serving as a member of the advisory board for Youth Theatre Japan.

**Ann Mayeda:** Born and raised in Seattle, Mayeda is a third-generation American of Japanese descent. She graduated from the University of Washington and received her M.A. from the University of Birmingham in Britain. She lectures at Konan Women's University in Kobe. She is a former director of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). She has been involved in coordinating and teaching in a MEXT-funded teacher-training program for elementary school teachers. She is a teacher-trainer, and consultant for several public elementary schools in the Osaka and Nara areas, and has conducted workshops for the Osaka Education Center.

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and what it means in terms of actual classroom practice. That this has not been clearly communicated to ALTs or any native teachers involved in English activities should not come as a surprise. One of our roles as a language teaching organization has been to disseminate the proper information to all concerned parties.

**Yatsugi:** The compulsory English teaching should not be a frontloaded part of English lessons at junior high schools. This is true, but pupils of the fifth and sixth grades have a strong desire to learn and they want to write familiar alphabetical words in English. It is important to draw their desire to learn English. The forthcoming English teaching should not be a study, and evaluations should not be made to judge each pupil's ability. I'm relieved to hear that the three-grade evaluation system, which is in use for other subjects at public elementary schools, will not be introduced for English teaching.

**Moderator: Mr. Nakai. Could you tell us why the fifth and sixth grades have been selected as the starting age for compulsory English teaching?**

**Nakai:** There were a variety of opinions among members of the Central Education Council about how to start and when to start English education at elementary schools. They also had a long discussion on whether English teaching itself is truly necessary for elementary school pupils. There remain concerns about the advisability of starting English teaching at elementary schools in various fields. But a broad consensus has been reached that English education should be started earlier than the junior high school stage, so that motivations to learn English will be nurtured among children. Junior high school students initially show interest in learning English, but many of them come to have difficulty continuing their English studies.

Repetition is necessary to learn any foreign languages, but this is hard. This being the case, it is said to be advisable to start English teaching at an earlier age to nurture pupils' willingness to study English. This notion was relatively easy to accept even for opponents of English teaching at elementary schools. We are introducing the new system after a three-year transitional period that started in 2009, and it will start in the form of foreign language activities.

**Yoshida:** Experts who oppose English teaching at elementary schools usually focus on how Japanese people should be and how our identity should be maintained. They are concerned that our identity as Japanese nationals is being threatened, at a time when there are an increasing number of Japanese who cannot use the Japanese language properly and they believe efforts must be made first of all to strengthen the Japanese language education. Their argument sometimes sounds ideological. But when we carefully listen to their recent discussion, they do not necessarily oppose English teaching for children itself. I know some of them and we talk to each other. They just fear that the English education at elementary schools may fail because it is ill-prepared. They never expect that the Japanese language skills of young Japanese people would be jeopardized only by the planned once-a-week English teaching at elementary schools.

**Nakai:** The Japanese language as our mother tongue is the very base of every kind of intellectual activity to express our thoughts and emotions. In the new course of study Japanese language lessons will also be strengthened this time at elementary schools.

**Yoshida:** I understand that opponents among members of the Central Education Council also understood the need to start English teaching at elementary schools, but they tended to take a priority-based approach calling for strengthening Japanese-language education before English teaching at elementary schools. Of course, we know that preparations have not been fully made for the forthcoming program, but we have to start anyway. Unless we step forward, no budget will be obtained. Proponents of English education at elementary schools, including myself, are not entirely confident that the compulsory English teaching will be successful, but it must be started. Nothing will be started as long as we continue to wait until preparations are complete.

**Yatsugi:** People who are teachers at elementary schools experienced English education from their days at junior high schools. They have knowledge about English itself, but they just lacked actual opportunities to speak English. As a result, some of them came to dislike English. But the English skills of public elementary school teachers, including those who had disliked English, have definitely improved compared with

1992 when we started calling for the introduction of English teaching for elementary school children.

**Moderator: Ms. Mayeda, what do you think about the importance or difficulty of teaching English to Japanese children?**

**Mayeda:** As mentioned in the elementary school English guidelines, it is important to nurture children's "willingness to communicate." I would argue that every child comes to school with this desire and curiosity intact. This is evident when one sees children quickly gather around ALTs or other guests at their schools, talking with them in Japanese or using any English they know. This is exactly what the "willingness to communicate" is. How to maintain and strengthen this within the English classroom environment is key, but it is challenging to train nonlanguage specialist teachers in how to do this. Why? Because elementary school teachers are trained to teach subjects, such as math, social studies and science where the learning goals are quite clear. But the goal in English classes at elementary schools is to nurture the willingness to communicate through experiential activities. So what exactly would that be? There is no rubric to go by to evaluate this for each class. Some schools may have already failed in this regard but are not even aware of it. On-going training is necessary for classroom teachers and ALTs. We often hear that English classes for fifth and sixth graders are more difficult to teach because they tend to be more self-conscious, less willing to make mistakes and have a desire to understand things more fully. But I don't think it is any more difficult to teach English in this type of classroom environment if that were the goal. I think the challenge lies in implementing the guidelines as they stand without on-going teacher training.

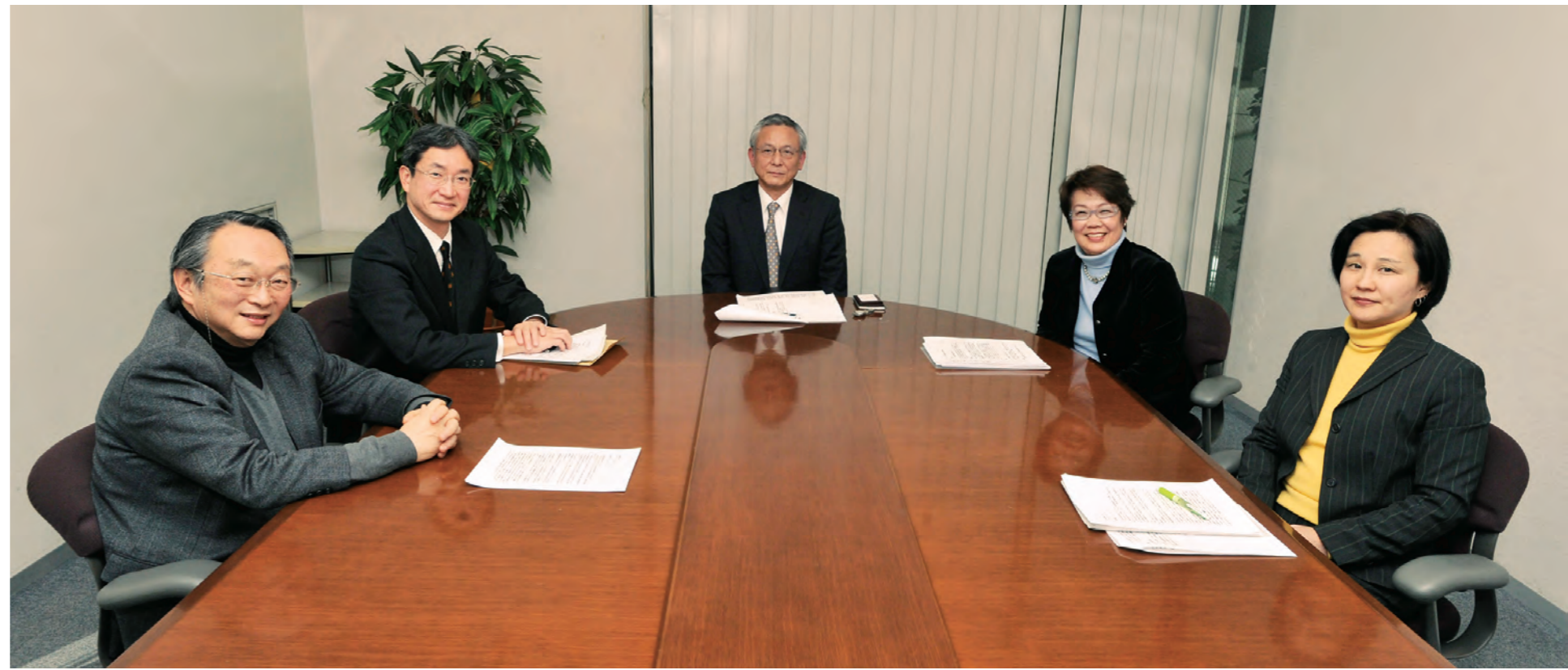
**Moderator: We'd like to turn to the actual situation at schools preparing to start the compulsory English teaching as well as the challenges facing them. We've seen the survey by Benesse Corp. about elementary school teachers and the results looked a little bit negative to me. Mr. Nakai. How do you evaluate the current situation?**

**Nakai:** We were very much interested in the survey, but the results were not

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so surprising to us. The compulsory English teaching is the first ever undertaking for elementary schools and the lessons will be made by classroom teachers, not teachers who cover specific subjects such as music, physical education, and class room teachers have not been necessarily fully trained for English teaching. So, the finding that many teachers were worried about teaching English was not surprising to us. Taking this concern into consideration, we have taken several measures to help them be well prepared for the full implementation of the elementary English education. First of all, we have made a standard teaching material called "Eigo-Note," "English notebooks," which was mentioned by Ms. Mayeda earlier, and distributed it to all schools since 2009. Teachers training, using English notebooks has been held nationwide. The DVD that illustrates several model English elementary lessons is also distributed to all schools. Let me also point out that we have introduced the three-year trial period from 2009 and as a result, 99 percent of the elementary schools have already started English teaching. Preparations are making headway in due course. The Benesse survey was carried out last summer, but our survey at the end of last year showed much more encouraging results. The full implementation of elementary English is almost with us. If you ask us the current status, "so far, so good" is our assessment. Some confusion may be inevitable. But owing to "English notebook," teachers' training and the three-year trial experience, I am confident that we can manage it.

**Yoshida:** A similar survey by Benesse Corp. was carried out four years ago and the latest survey was the second one. The situation has considerably changed since the initial survey. When I saw the result of the latest survey, I felt that preparations were making progress more smoothly than expected. But as more efforts are made, shortcomings or challenges become clearer. It is true that teachers are concerned that time is not enough for them to consult with ALTs and prepare teaching materials. Challenges regarding how to effectively



**Heated debate:** Three educators and a senior education administrator attend a recent Japan Times round-table discussion, moderated by former Japan Times Managing Editor Keisuke Okada (center), on the significance of, and challenges for, compulsory English teaching for elementary school students, due to start in April. They are (from left) Kensaku Yoshida, a professor of Sophia University, Kazuhiro Nakai of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, Kazuyo Yatsugi of the Japan Association for the Study of Teaching English to Children (JASTEC) and Ann Mayeda of Konan Women's University Kobe. YOSHIKI MIURA

link English teaching at elementary schools to English lessons at junior high schools have become clearer than four years ago. But the findings do not mean that the situation has worsened. Conversely, the survey results indicate that as teachers tried hard to grasp the situation, they have become more aware of the concrete problems that need to be tackled. As the challenges become clearer, it becomes easier for teachers to deal with the situation. I did not take the latest results negatively. I was glad to see classroom teachers making hard efforts for the start of English teaching.

**Moderator: Is there any gap between the role to be performed by ALTs under the new system and what they want to do? What do you think, Ms. Mayeda?**

**Mayeda:** Certainly in some situations there is a gap, but I don't think it should be blamed on ALTs. Classroom teachers have been hesitant in leading English classes because they lack confidence in their English skills. So often-times the ALTs have been thrust into the

**Mayeda:** The progress made in English is quite different from class to class depending on classroom teachers' attitudes. I observed two fourth grade classes yesterday. In the first class the classroom teacher was an active participant and learner. He spoke with the ALT, and engaged in all the activities sometimes as a team-teacher and at times as a fellow student. In the second class, the teacher took a step back, away from the ring of communication and mostly observed the class conducted entirely by the ALT, and only sporadically disciplined the unruly students. There was so much more English heard in the first class. The students were randomly speaking and using English much like their classroom teacher. They were not always making sense nor getting the right answers but they did have the right attitude. This was in sharp contrast to the second class where there was less English spoken and the goal seemed to focus more on winning the game than communicating with each other or the ALT. So you can see that the classroom

**Moderator: It is often said that these J-SHINE-certified English instructors are not fully utilized, isn't it?**

**Yoshida:** In the case of J-Shine, which is a nonprofit organization (NPO) to accreditation organization for people who want to teach English in the elementary schools, there are over 20,000 Japanese accredited as qualified elementary school English instructors, but only several thousand people are actually engaged in English teaching at elementary schools. Local boards of education have not recognized these teachers as they seek native speakers. Usually, these teachers have to work on a voluntary basis and they cannot make a living only with this job. The number of such Japanese English instructors is gradually increasing. Unlike ALTs, they are Japanese and they can communicate with classroom teachers during the activity or out of the class, and this helps smooth their English teaching. The use of English speaking people in the community must be a very effective means, but their roles are yet to be fully recognized. If the use of ALTs becomes difficult from now on, opportunities will increase for these teachers to help English teaching, I think.

**Moderator: Another problem is what to do with collaboration between elementary schools and junior high schools. English teaching at elementary schools is aimed at nurturing communicating abilities, but I just wonder what must be done to continue to develop the English skills seamlessly from the elementary school to the junior high school.**

**Nakai:** How to ensure a smooth link between the elementary school and the junior high school is a major issue that must be studied. A pilot project is under way at 22 elementary and junior high schools to ensure the continuity of elementary to junior high school education. While watching the progress of this project, we are making a study on related matters.

**Yoshida:** I was on the advisory committee for one of these three-year projects several years ago for the integration of English teaching between elementary schools and junior high schools. Initially, junior high school teachers were unenthusiastic about how to link their English education to elementary schools. Attendees from the junior high school side were limited to the main English teachers of junior high schools. In the second three-year project, however, the number of teachers from the junior high school side increased and at that time, we hoped they would take a look at how seriously their elementary school colleagues were teaching English. But their experience was little reflected in English teaching at the junior high school. Junior high school teachers just didn't know how to integrate their English lessons with English teaching at elementary schools. Some parts of the English Note are included in most of the new English textbooks for the first grade of the junior high school. As far as teaching materials are concerned, some efforts have been made for integration, but the teaching method itself must be changed. More efforts must be done to ensure effective cooperation between the two sides.

**Yatsugi:** We have received reports that English activities earlier introduced as part of the integrated studies periods have had favorable influence on children's attitude toward the traditional subjects. Children who were less interested in subjects other than English are said to have shown greater interest in these subjects after they experienced English.

role of conducting all the classes on their own and even planning all the lessons. It should be a more collaborative process, but in the real world it hasn't always happened this way. When ALTs are now told they are no longer the "main" English teacher, but rather the "assistant" to the non-English speaking classroom teacher and must now follow their lead, well, you can see how there might be a disconnect. This is the point where everyone needs to clearly understand the course goals, and precisely why the classroom teachers need to take on a more active and leading role in the classrooms. So while communication must be open, I can see where it doesn't always happen with such transparency. Many classroom teachers are very serious about starting English activities under the new system and are working hard to not only convey the changes to their ALTs but also eager to implement the changes necessary within themselves in order to accommodate a smoother transition.

**Nakai:** The forthcoming system is not aimed at teaching children English skills themselves. Teachers will be required to nurture children's willingness to communicate in English. So, they will be able to teach English with the help of ALTs. If teachers try hard to communicate with ALTs in English and demonstrate this to children, then their willingness to communicate will be nurtured.

**Yatsugi:** If children see their teachers trying hard to communicate with natives in English, this will encourage them to join the lesson more actively. Teachers do not need to speak fluent English.

**Yoshida:** Children are aware that the English speaking model is natives, but they also know that the model as a communicator is their Japanese teacher. The models for English speaking and communication will be played by different people. Children are aware of this, because they know they just can't be Americans. When natives speak in English, children think it only natural that they do so, but when their Japanese teachers use English to communicate with the ALTs, they feel proud of them, and want to emulate them—not the native speaker.

**Moderator: Professor Yoshida. Your theory is that English education must be integrated from the elementary school to the university.**

**Yoshida:** Experiential learning is the most important part of elementary school education. Elementary school children learn through experience the workings of society and nature. For example, they learn about society by working with the people in their communities, doing clean-up activities, visiting factories, etc. Then, they learn about more intellectual and abstract ideas at junior high school. Whether children have gone through experiential learning before learning difficult matters at the junior high school greatly influences the level of their understanding of abstract discussions. Under the existing English teaching system, abstract matters have been taught from the beginning of junior high school without giving children basic knowledge and experience about English. As a result, children have difficulty understanding English. This time, experiential learning through communication will be introduced for English teaching at elementary schools. This is hoped to help facilitate their understanding of more abstract aspects related to the English language at junior high school.

**Moderator: Now, I would like to seek a few words from Mr. Nakai to close our discussion.**

**Nakai:** Under the newly revised course of study, the teaching hours of English will be extended, and the increased vocabulary will be made mandatory for the students of junior and senior high schools, whereas English teaching for the fifth and sixth graders at public elementary schools will be made compulsory. The course of study is up for a full-fledged review and revision once in 10 years, but this does not mean that the newly launched English teaching scheme for elementary school pupils will remain unchanged for the next 10 years. We will closely observe how the new scheme will be implemented and its achievements, and if necessary, additional or new measures to improve or enhance the scheme would be taken ahead of the next revision of the course of study.

I should also refer to the newly established special study group of experts commissioned by the education ministry to examine how to improve the foreign language abilities of students at junior and senior high schools under the newly revised course of study. Hitherto, we have made it a rule to seek the opinions of education experts like professor Yoshida on how to change the curriculum for English teaching at schools. However, there prevails a strong voice, especially in the business world, that points to the shortcomings of English education at schools. This is why we appointed representatives of trading companies, manufacturing businesses, financial service corporations, mass media and even the sport world as members of the special study group by limiting education experts to half of its members.

Our ultimate goal is to nurture youths who are able to use English in a practical manner by the time they graduate from senior high schools and to foster youths who will be active in the international community.

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