

# **The introduction of the ‘Eigo Note’**

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**Introduction**

This paper discusses English language education in Japan and more specifically the planned introduction of the Eigo Note, English language education curriculum. This is not a new idea and has been heatedly debated for the past 20 years. What is new though is the actual reality of having organized English language lessons for elementary level pupils. A text has already been published. It is already in use in some pilot schools and other areas throughout Japan. The locality in usage described in this paper centers around the school district of Imabari City, Ehime prefecture. Imabari City began using the 'Note' on a district wide basis from April 2009.

As per direction from MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) also formally known as the MOE (Ministry of Education) English will be taught to all 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders on a weekly basis from April 2011. The weekly instruction will be accomplished through the use of a text/notebook; - thus the title 'Eigo Note'.

The text itself consists of various activities, tasks, and listening exercises. The teacher's manual is written almost entirely in Japanese. Recently the publisher uploaded an English version to their homepage site. The English version can be easily downloaded and printed out. The manual in Japanese or English, offers examples and suggestions for instruction of each lesson. The lessons (of which there are 9 each for both 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup>) are broken down; with one main target phrase and three or four lessons. This breakdown is for the students to see, strengthen, and secure that particular target phrase before moving on to the next lesson.

The targets covered range simply from distinction between large and small letters of the alphabet, and students expressing their likes and abilities over a wide range of subjects (fruit, sports, and future occupation) to more complicated presentations in the form of original skits in the final lesson of the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. A major criticism is in this area; there are too many topics and the complexity of the subject matter progresses from simple ABC's to conducting presentations. In a span of two years the Eigo Note is attempting to accomplish what is currently painstakingly being covered in the junior high schools in three years.

In addition to the student text and teachers instruction manual, there is also an accompanying CD for the instructor to utilize. The CD embraces the text with practice dialogues, songs, chants, and listening exercises. Beside the CD, there is also a CD Rom for computer related activities. The CD Rom basically mirrors activities, games, and chants already covered in the text.

For best results utilizing the CD Rom it is most beneficial for the learners if a touch panel board is associated with it. Unfortunately due to cost constraints

Imabari City has been unable to purchase them. There is also a less functional but also less expensive version that is currently under consideration. A budget for the purchase of white boards for every school in Japan was allocated by the previous Japanese ruling party, LDP (Liberal Democratic Party). Since the most recent national election and due to a change in majority, this budget has most recently been put under review and is very likely to be withdrawn.

The teacher's manual for the *Eigo Note* is written almost entirely in Japanese. As stated earlier there is a downloadable English version from the publisher's web site. This unfortunately, is not a very well known fact. Very few schools have the English version although it is easy to acquire. This causes extreme frustration for the Assistant Language Teachers (ALT's). These ALT's are almost always foreign native speakers of English who for the most part have very little Japanese language ability. Therefore, the *Eigo Note* is not considered to be team-teaching friendly.

Added to this is the fact that very few Japanese elementary school teachers have acquired even a low competency of English ability themselves. The discussion of lesson planning between ALT's and the Japanese homeroom teacher's can be very frustrating for all parties involved. Due to this fact, the *Eigo Note* has already drawn extremely negative reviews from many ALT's even before the 2011 start-up date.

### **Previous Government Policies and Strategies**

As formerly mentioned, the idea of structured language lessons is not a fresh idea. It has not come about hastily but rather slowly and with many previous policies not fulfilling their intended objectives. Thusly as one policy has failed to live up to its intended expectations a refreshed course of action has sprung up to take its place.

*“Various foreign language education policies have been prodigiously developed and implemented at the local and/or micro levels (e.g. at local schools, communities, boards of education, and local governments) these have yielded substantial diversity in practice at elementary schools.”*  
(Butler, 2007)

Prior years and Government plans have yielded such titles as:

**2002** - Developing a Strategic Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities.

**2003** - The Course of Study for Foreign Languages – *Internationalization*

**2004** – English Forum: Regarding the Establishment of an Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities – Upgrading English Education in Japan

## 2011 – Establishment of a Uniform Set of English Classes for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Graders - Introduction of the 'Eigo Note'

These previous plans have been very vague, in implementation and action. This has come about for a variety of reasons the main one being, that 'it hasn't been done before'. Other countries (South Korea, China, Philippines) have implemented their own brand of EES (English at Elementary Schools). This being Japan though, EES can only come about with the 'Japan' brand name shining through. More politely put:

*"Without having a clear blueprint for what EES should look like in practice, the Japanese government has taken slow and careful steps towards introducing EES. "* (Butler, 2007)

Additionally, the introduction of English education in greater Japan has seemingly matured along three distinct periods. Regardless of policy generated these three same spans of time have regularly progressed.

*"These periods were characterized by (1) initial discussions regarding EES; (2) planting the seeds for the introduction of EES; and (3) preparations for making EES compulsory"* (Butler, 2007)

With such an uneven and constantly changing plan of English education seeming to cyclically occur there are many who have adamantly argued against the implementation of any English language programs at all. Government entities', educators, and even parents have been involved in the debate.

*"Such diversity has led to heated debate among educators and the general public over whether or not English should have been allowed to be taught at elementary schools in the first place, and whether the central government should make English a mandatory academic subject and ensure a degree of uniformity."* (Butler, 2007)

Regardless of disagreement, a decision has been reached by the Japanese Government and that settlement is that English will be taught regularly to 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. No matter where the school, from Hokkaido to Okinawa it will all be the same with slight variations at the discretion of the individual schools and instructors. Consequently, this is a huge leap in English education in Japan.

*"In March 2006, a panel consisting of members of MEXT's Central Council for Education (CCE, an advisory council for the minister of MEXT) proposed that English should be compulsory for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade level students (with students receiving one hour of instruction per week)." (Butler, 2007)*

### **Imabari City: Indecisiveness Ahead of Improvement**

In advance of 2011, there are already numerous school districts throughout Japan that have chosen to get a head start on English Education. They have accomplished this by implementing the 'Eigo Note' in their current curriculums' of 2009/2010. Additionally, Pilot schools have been established to research and examine practical lesson plans and materials. The number of pilot schools varies from city to city and prefecture to prefecture.

The main aims of these pilot schools appears to be to work out the problem areas of the 'Eigo Note' so the rest of Japan does not have to. This makes sense actually and hopefully the money, time, and energy that has been used to supplement the 'Eigo Note' will not have been spent in vain. In the Imabari school district, some schools have been in the pilot program for as long as 3 years.

Similar to other areas, Imabari city, Ehime prefecture, has conducted many meetings and workshops prior to the set up of the "Eigo Note". These have been basically used to introduce the new text, its components and requirements to the Japanese elementary school teachers, Japanese English Teachers (JTE's), and Assistant Language Teachers (ALT's). As can be understood, there has been much confusion at these workshops and meetings.

Regrettably, up until March 2009, there were still no clear guidelines as to how the Eigo Note would be taught along with the lower grade (1<sup>st</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup>) English classes. This was a very relevant point since it should be noted that the Imabari City area has had the establishment of some sort of English language education in its primary schools for over 15 years. Imabari city debated 3 plans before reaching a conclusion.

**Plan A** – This initial approach had the JTE using the Eigo Note 'as is' while at the same time totally suspending English language education for grades 1<sup>st</sup>- 4<sup>th</sup>. The total elimination of classes for lower grades caused quite an uproar, among both instructors and parents. Thusly, without too much fanfare this plan was quickly abandoned.

**Plan B** – Another approach but one that many instructors still felt too rigid in its presentation of the Eigo Note was that of; having the Eigo taught 'as is', with infrequent classes for the lower grades. This still did not please all parties involved and still a final plan was tendered.

**Plan C** – This was an extremely liberal approach with much free rein left up to the instructors. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes would utilize the 'Note' in any order of lessons, adding/ subtracting segments of the Eigo Note as the teacher saw fit. The lower grades would still be able to have instruction in English activities on a somewhat frequent basis (once or twice a month).

There were still some holdouts for plan A and B but in the final resolution in Imabari city, overall, most schools and instructors went with **Plan C**. The initial flow through the different plans was due to the uncertainty of the BOE as well as lack of guidance from MEXT itself.

The overall acceptance of 'Plan C' is in itself very fortunate; satisfyingly, many schools have realized the importance of a sturdy bridge of EFL from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> grades. This of course has helped smooth the transition of a weekly curriculum for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. Not to mention the fact that Imabari city, Ochi-gun district has been employing native English teachers for instruction in kindergarten, primary, and junior high level for several years. When plan 'A' was announced there was much dismay from teachers, ALT's , and parents alike that all the previous English education had been in vain. Fortunately at later meetings when plan 'C' was introduced, many members in the audience gave a sigh of relief.

### **The 'Different but Same' Approach**

Even with this overall acceptance and implementation of the Eigo Note there are currently vast differences in how English classes are conducted within Imabari city. It could be rationalized as *'the different but same approach'*. Some schools are sticking strictly to the Eigo Note while others have a more loose approach of the Eigo Note and the addition of supplementary material. A few others have totally disregarded the use of the Note and have used their own rough Eigo Note agenda toward EFL attainment.

In whichever form it has taken the 'Eigo Note' approach is being used in all Imabari city public elementary schools in some shape or form. The final destination is basically the same; just the route on how to get there differs. The results of these early implemented classes should be noteworthy (no pun intended) by the actual start up date in 2011.

The variations in Eigo Note instruction are due to many factors. These elements include but are not limited to the ability and confidence of the JTE in conducting EFL classes, the size of the classes (number of students), size of the school (total number of classes the ALT has to visit), and frequency of visits by an ALT to each school (once a week, month).

The schools that I personally visit have each taken a unique approach to their conduct regarding the 'Eigo Note'. The ultimate decision on which how to instruct the 'Note' was either decided by the teacher in charge of International Education (usually the 6<sup>th</sup> grade HRT) or the principal of the school. Although I personally have a M.A. in ELT and 20 years of teaching English education in Japan, as a foreigner and unlicensed to teach in Japanese schools, my opinion is taken rather weakly.

Listed below are the schools I attend. The total number of years that I have been at each school varies from 3-15 years. The size and class numbers also have a wide variance; an example being Imabari 4<sup>th</sup> grade class which has 7 students compared to Kikuma elementary school which has 37 students in their 4<sup>th</sup> grade class. How this will effect their attainment of EFL as they become 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders will be intriguing to say the least.

#### **Imabari Elementary School**

(Total number of students = 102)

We discuss the next week's lesson plan a week a head of time. Everything is pretty much left up to me. The JTE utilizes the 'Eigo Note' in Japanese for about 10/15 minutes. We use the book and the CD, The remaining time I use to teach English using games/activities that may or may not be connected to that days Eigo Note lesson. Both 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades HRT have poor English language skills. This is a common factor for many Japanese elementary school teachers and something that may haunt the whole Eigo Note system of English education for years to come.

### **Kikuma Elementary School**

(Students = 217)

Although a much larger school than others, it actually has the same number of teachers as schools half its size. This is due to the fact that the BOE counts classes not by the number of students when factoring the required number of teachers per school. Due to this fact; the teachers are constantly busy. We have no time to discuss the lessons for any of the grades 1<sup>st</sup> -6<sup>th</sup>. Classes consist of 10-15 minutes of the Eigo note of which afterwards I teach topics or phrases that may or may not be part of the Eigo Note. At this school the fifth grade teacher speaks some English. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade HRT (home room teacher) does not.

### **Hiyoshi Elementary School**

(Students = 118)

This school is very similar to that of Imabari E.S. The JTE's apply the Note for 10-15 minutes of each class session. The remaining time I teach. Both HRTs have higher aural skills but their speaking ability for English is low.

### **Kameoka Elementary School**

(Students = 95)

The situation at this school is rather unique. The 6<sup>th</sup> grade HRT has chosen not to use the Eigo Note. The class's topics are roughly followed along the Eigo Note curriculum. The text, CD, or other material associated with the Eigo Note are no where to be found. The 5<sup>th</sup> grade HRT has similarly followed suit. Classes at this school are at the same or higher level of English as other schools. Both teachers possess a sub-standard level of English.  
\*It should be noted that ironically the 6<sup>th</sup> grade HRT who has chosen NOT to use the Eigo Note was previously at one of the pilot schools that helped introduce the text to the rest of Imabari city.

The size of the classes can vary greatly between schools. In Imabari city the upper limit is set at 40 pupils per one homeroom teacher. The abilities of the individuals can vary greatly. Moreover, at the elementary school level due to the shortage of qualified Special Needs Instructors, there may be one or more individuals with various disabilities in the English class. These disabilities can vary from simply being a slower learner, to autism or Down syndrome. These variables can affect the overall flow of the class. How the classes are designed with the thought of any special needs students involved can add an extra measure of difficulty to the lesson.

Also as added information, it should be noted that these days with cuts in supplementary budgets the use of native English speakers is slowly on the wane, while that of volunteers with 2<sup>nd</sup> language abilities is on the rise. This new brand of English teacher is known as JATs (Japanese Assistant Teachers) and they have the added advantage of being able to assist in a variety of classes. Since they are obviously Japanese and language barrier problems do not impede them such as with other ALTs (JET, Japanese Exchange and Teaching participants or private hire ALTs) their presence is gaining wider acceptance.

Unfortunately, most JATs that I have worked with have little or no English abilities. In addition, they may simply be retired junior/senior high Japanese teachers. They are used to the junior/senior school style and approach to English language learning. Add to this the fact that they may also only now be stepping into an elementary school teaching environment for the first time since their very own elementary school days. If JATs will be an added plus or an added distraction is yet to be seen in the future.

### **MEXT Guidelines**

Regardless of other factors there have been a few opaque guidelines put forth by MEXT. The main understanding being that although there will be regular English classes the focus of *'internationalization'* will be at its core. This is an important factor to understand. A broad range of cultures are introduced throughout the 'Eigo Note', not only focusing on blond blue eyed westerners.

MEXT states in their official guidelines that:

*"It is necessary to develop people who can act independently with a global point of view in a society that is becoming more international. MEXT is working comprehensively on such measures as (1) enhancing education to deepen International understanding and teach foreign languages, (2) promoting international exchange, (3) enhancing education of Japanese children overseas, and (4) enhancing education for Japanese children returning from overseas and foreign children in Japan."*

(MEXT 2007)

More specifically, MEXT has listed an overall objective and suggested content for any instruction of a foreign language.



## *"I. OVERALL OBJECTIVES*

*To form the foundations of pupils' communication abilities through foreign language while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages." (MEXT 2007)*

Additionally, it has been put forth by MEXT regarding language education that:

Learning to like the language is an important item that is being focused on at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade level. MEXT has understood the importance of this key concept

*"...fostering a positive attitude toward communication..." (MEXT 2007)*

Hopefully this can be accomplished before the years of junior and senior high school English take hold.

Additionally more specific and definite areas of language learning have been targeted by MEXT to ensure an expansive approach to English language learning.

## *"II. CONTENT*

*[Grade 5 and Grade 6]*

*1. Instructions should be given on the following items in order to help people actively engage in communication in a foreign language:*

- (1) To experience the joy of communication in the foreign language.*
- (2) To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language.*
- (3) To learn the importance of verbal communication.*

*2. Instructions should be given on the following items in order to deepen the experiential understanding of the languages and cultures of Japan and foreign countries;*

- (1) To become familiar with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language, to learn its differences from the Japanese language, and to be aware of the interesting aspects of language and its richness.*
- (2) To learn the difference in ways of living, customs, and events between Japan and foreign countries and to be aware of various points of view and ways of thinking.*
- (3) To experience communication with people of different cultures and to deepen the understanding of culture. (MEXT 2007)*

## Comments, Complaints and Concerns

Many criticisms can be thrown at the actual 'Eigo Note (book) and the curriculum itself, all with valid warrant. It should be kept in mind though that this is the reason pilot schools were established. Problems and difficult areas can be further addressed and examined. This is the 1<sup>st</sup> edition of the Eigo Note and as with all first editions there are bound to be some rough areas that need to be further smoothed out.

Current instructors of English in Japanese schools have not only voiced their opinion of the implementation of weekly classes but also the importance of the lead time before the Eigo Note officially begins.

*“These next two years are even more critical than the actual initiation date of English as a formal subject at the elementary school. This is the time when homeroom teachers (HRTs) can become familiar with the concept of teaching English on their own or with the ALT as the supporter.”* (Dart, 2009)

The main goal of weekly English classes as put forth by MEXT as been the leveling of English education to one plane throughout all primary schools in Japan. Previously there have been extreme differences in English education by region and resources available.

*“Up to now, and until 2011, English at the elementary school has been at the discretion of the Board of Education and the schools. It is optional. Some municipalities send their ALTs to the elementary schools while others don't. Even among these elementary schools that do have lessons, the number of hours of English and the content varies greatly. Some schools have 30 hours a year of English at the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades while others have only six hours a year. While some BOEs have established a standard curriculum, many schools and municipalities have simply left the content in the hands of the ALTs. This creates massive variations from school to school, class to class, and region to region, depending on each ALTs company or organization, experience, training, hours at the school and personal reasons for teaching.”* (Dart, 2009)

Another glaring flaw in the establishment of weekly English classes utilizing the Eigo Note is just that: 'Weekly'. When is enough, enough? It has been pretty much accepted in linguistic teaching circles that weekly classes alone do not even come close to accomplishing the goal of acquiring a second language.

*...“One or two hours a week will not produce advanced second language speakers, no matter how young they were when they began.”* (Lightbrown/Spada, 2006)

This is especially true if the only exposure to that second language is through limited classroom experience. The reasons and goals for learning a second language are usually the driving force behind acquiring a second language. In the instance of the Eigo Note there seems to be no ultimate goal other than to experience the joy of learning.

Examining the 'Note' closely reveals that the units do not link together. What may be taught and even learned at the beginning of any school year is quickly forgotten by most students two or three units later. Each unit is a single entity with very little relevance for the previous unit or the next.

Most of the units seem to be taken from or at least designed by those with Japanese junior high school teaching experience. It would not be surprising at all that as time progressed, Eigo Note classes morphed into something akin to *junior*, junior high English classes.

After all the excitement, chest beating, discussions and debates, the implementation of weekly classes could in all actuality have little or no effect. It's true that school children may gain a wider exposure of internationalization and cultural awareness. But then children these days can obtain the same information from watching a nature program on television or surfing the web in a matter of minutes.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it comes with no debate that there will be regular English language education classes for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade Japanese students from April 2011. The difference that this will make in the attainment of the English language is not so certain. There are many factors still to be addressed, with the greatest concern being the English language education of the Japanese teachers themselves. For most Japanese elementary school teachers studying the English language was not part of their requirement to get a teaching license. This is a major stumbling block that could have huge ramifications as to how well the Eigo Note is actually conducted. MEXT has proposed and prophesied the idea of a level playing field for all elementary English classes throughout Japan. If this will be true or not is yet to be seen. In any event it has been a long time in coming for there to be an actual text entitled the 'Eigo Note'.

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