

*English Education for Elementary School Students :  
Issues Viewed from Parent Hopes, Cram School Attendance*

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Studies are underway on the propriety of making English-language education compulsory at the elementary school level in Japan. According to the results of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 70.7 percent of elementary school student parents polled replied that such education should be required.<sup>1</sup> Among the reasons cited for this view is the belief that becoming familiar with English from an early age will reduce struggling with the language later on, as well as rendering it easier to learn the pronunciation, vocabulary and other aspects of English. Opposed to making English mandatory, meanwhile were 21.5 percent of the parent samples, who noted that they wanted their children to master the contents of other subjects and learn Japanese in the correct way, expressed concerns about overburdening students and other contrary opinions.

At public elementary schools, over 70 percent of students are experiencing English activities within their interdisciplinary learning hours.<sup>2</sup> Including other time frameworks as well, we find that 88 percent of elementary schools now offer English activities.<sup>3</sup> However, the class time involved for English is only between 7 to 12 hours a year<sup>4</sup>, meaning that if further studies are desired the choices include attending private schools, designated experimental schools, certified schools in special zones for structural reform and other options. Other than that, children will need to attend cram schools or study English at home. Because of this, the learning of English by elementary school students highly depends on the attitudes of their parents toward the need to study English, the household economic conditions, the ability to teach English in the home and other factors.<sup>5</sup>

What types of parents favor English education at the elementary school level, and who send their children to English cram schools? I examine if there is any difference in traits among parents with different ideas for English-language education for elementary school children, using the data from a February 2004 survey of the parents of first and fifth grade students attending Ota Municipal Elementary School in Gunma Prefecture.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, the Contingent Valuation Method (CVM) was used to measure the value of elementary school English education on a monetary base. The CVM is a method in which questionnaire surveys are used to ask for evaluations of conditions that do not actually exist, and measure those effects.

In the survey, we assume that all of the existing public elementary and junior high schools would offer both an English-language course and a conventional course. In the English course, almost all classes other than native (Japanese) language would be taught

in English, seeking to improve student English abilities to the 2nd Grade of the STEP (Society for Testing English Proficiency) English Proficiency Test upon graduation from elementary school, and then on to the Pre-1st Grade level when leaving junior high school. The share of class time taught in English would steadily rise with the grade, while at the junior high school level Japanese-language classes geared to prepare students for the high school entrance examinations in Japan would also be introduced.

Under the conventional course, classes would be taught in Japanese as in the past, with English-language classes introduced as a subject from the junior high school level. The children would be allowed to choose their preferred course of study, although a monthly tuition fee would be charged if taking the English course.

After explaining this hypothetical scenario, the parents were asked whether they would want to have their own children participate in such an English course from the following school year. When selecting the English course, those parents were then asked about the level of tuition they would be willing to pay for that course.

Examining the results, I found that 54.7 percent chose the English course (see Table 1). For the monthly tuition parents are willing to pay for the English course, the average for all respondents is 2,367 yen, while 4,276 yen when limited to those choosing the English course. This is 1,368 yen less than the 5,644-yen average monthly tuition actually paid by parents who currently send their children to cram schools, English conversation schools or other institutions to learn English.

**Table 1 Monthly Tuition Willing to Pay for English Education vs. Actual Cram School Tuition**

	Share of total respondents (%)	Monthly tuition (yen)			
		Average	Median	Minimum	Maximum
Monthly tuition willing to pay for English education (respondent total)	100.0	2,367	1,000	0	30,000
Monthly tuition willing to pay for English education (those selecting English course)	54.7	4,276	3,000	0	30,000
Monthly tuition for cram school (when children are actually sent)	21.5	5,644	6,000	0	20,000

What types of parents selected the English course? When I calculate chi-square test of Fisher's exact test, for distinguishing distribution for those selecting the English course and those preferring the conventional course, the observed differences are significant for the following areas: (1) The degree of English ability that parents hope their children will achieve; (2) growth in the children's English skills envisioned by parents; (3) whether parents feel their children enjoy their studies or not; (4) parent age; (5) degree of English used by parents; and (6) whether children are sent to English conversation cram schools or English-language schools (see Table 2). In other words, differences were noted in how parents feel about the need for English and the abilities of their children, as well as in the English-language use environment of the parents themselves. Compared to parents who chose the conventional course, there was a pronounced trend for those selecting the English course to be relatively young, have frequent opportunities to use English, and for their children to be learning English conversation at cram schools or language schools. These parents also have high expectations in the English skills of their children and

envision that the more they study the greater their English skills will become. Meanwhile, there are few children in the English course who are thought not to like studies much by their parents.

Next, examining the distribution of parents who currently send their children to cram schools or language schools to learn English conversation and those who do not, as with the distribution of those who selected the English course and the conventional course, there are significant differences in the expectations that parents place in their children's English skills and their projections for the progress the children will make in those studies. Differing from the course selection distribution, however, is that significant disparities were found in parent academic background, the number of children in the family and household income. Compared to children who are not being sent to cram schools, those who attend such schools have parents with higher academic backgrounds, fewer children in their families and higher household income.

**Table 2 Differences in Course Selection and Cram School Attendance Distribution**

	Distribution in those selecting conventional course/English course	Distribution of those sending/not sending children to cram schools
Respondent age	**	
Mother's academic background		**
Father's academic background		**
Respondent's degree of English use	*	
Number of children (total)		*
Household income		***
Expected improvement in English skills	***	***
Envisioned growth in English ability	***	***
Enjoy studies	***	**
Attend English cram school	*	-

Note: Results based on 2-distribution or Fisher's Exact Test.

\*\*\*: significant at 1% level, \*\*: significant at 5% level, and \*: significant at 10% level

This study hypothesized a considerably extreme approach to English education, in which English would be used to study other subjects. Nevertheless, even when faced with such a choice, over 50 percent of parents expressed a desire for English education in elementary school, as well as a willingness to pay an average monthly tuition for that course of 4,276 yen (over 1,000 yen less than the amount currently paid for cram school studies). However, although this degree of parents expressed the desire for English language at elementary school, only about 20 percent of all the children are actually learning English conversation at cram schools or English-language schools at present. Viewed from the parent distribution, selections of the English course are influenced by the parent's attitude on the expectations for the children's English language skills and the envisioned growth in their ability to use English. With regard to whether children are sent to cram schools or not, however, in addition these factors, also exerting an impact is parent academic background, household income and the number of children in the family.

From here on, considering the correlation between the individual variables as well, a more detailed quantitative analysis should be conducted. However, based on the simple cross analysis conducted here, the possibility is suggested that differences in a child's English education will stem from the parent's attitude toward English, household

economic conditions. Compulsory education serves the role of nurturing minimum basic talents for the people, regardless of individual parent attitude, income or other factors. Debate is currently being advanced on what degree of English language ability should be targeted as basic talents, as well as when to introduce the education needed to cultivate those English skills, curriculum, the instruction system and other details. At the same time, we should also discuss measures for, in the case that English education would not be made mandatory at the elementary school level, the gaps that would emerge between schools that introduce English education and those that do not; in the case that such education would be made mandatory, the anxieties of parents about the increased burden on their children and so forth.

(Notes)

- 1: “Attitude Survey on Elementary School English Education” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, June 2004 survey).
- 2: “Attitude Survey on Elementary School English Education” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, June 2004 survey).
- 3: “Elementary School English Activity Implementation Status Survey” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, May 2004 survey targeting results for fiscal 2003).
- 4: “Elementary School English Activity Implementation Status Survey” (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, May 2004 survey).
- 5: Children attending English conversation schools, English cram schools or learning from private tutors accounted for 47 percent of fourth and sixth graders surveyed (“Attitude Survey on Elementary School English Education,” June 2004 survey).
- 6: Conducted jointly by JCER and Professor Noboru Hidano of Tokyo Institute of Technology. Total respondents = 682 persons (87.0 percent response rate). For details, see “Evaluation Methods Used for National Policy” (JCER, 2004).