

# A Reform of English Education in Japan according to *the Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Ability"* from an Aspect of Teachers

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## 1. Introduction

This paper explores the current situation of English education in Japan regarding an aspect of teachers: what problems they have and what is expected of them in accordance with the present trend of reform of English education. In the first section, some noticeable situations which might bring about some problems therefore require certain measures to be taken are observed in three areas: teaching English at elementary schools, reforms of entrance examinations (specifically, the increasing use of listening comprehension tests), and English use in classrooms by teachers. In order to improve the situations all teachers are requested to make every effort to pursue the higher quality of English lessons through improving their own competence of both using and teaching English, therefore there is a growing demand for better teachers' training programs in Japan. In the next section, an attempt to contribute to the improvement of this situation is made from two approaches: analyzing the quality of English competence to be aimed at and proposing ideas for desirable plans of the intensive teachers' training.

## 2. The current situation of English education

### 2.1 Problems concerning English education at elementary schools

Activities to learn English language or foreign cultures have been extensively practiced at the elementary school level throughout Japan since the implementation of the new *Course of Study* for elementary school in 2002. Accordingly, teachers at elementary schools are confronting difficulties finding good ways to teach English. Problems we have here is a lack of people who can teach English to elementary schools' children systematically and amusingly. Since learning English at elementary schools is not categorized as a subject but as one of choices among activities in a class titled "Period for Integrated Study", hence a defect of

curriculum bridging elementary schools and junior high schools: the gap between what elements of English should be taught respectively at elementary schools and junior high schools. The contents taught at elementary schools often differ from school to school, which makes the situation more problematic.

## **2.2 Utilization of listening comprehension tests**

The entrance examinations for public high schools in all the prefectures in Japan now give applicants the listening comprehension tests to measure a part of their communicative abilities. In fourteen prefectures as of February, 2004, even the aural interview tests were administered at the entrance examinations for public high schools. Approximately 30% of the prefectures have adopted this interview tests and the rate is expected to grow in the future. At the university level also, a listening test as a part of the University Center Examination is going to be administered in 2006, which might affect the systems of applicants' selection at other universities: not a few universities are expected to adopt the results of the listening test as a part of their entrance examinations.

This tendency of entrance examination reform reflects the strong demand from society for English teachers to shift teaching methods from the old styles to new ones with more emphasis on communicative ability.

## **2.3 Concerning English competence of Japanese teachers**

*Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities"* released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2003 has set the target level of English competence of teachers utilizing the scores of three kinds of standardized tests: STEP (*Eiken*, the Society for Testing English Proficiency) pre-first level, TOEFL 550, and TOEIC 730 or over. Setting this kind of target should expectedly promote two aspects concerning teachers: awareness of self-training and the use of English for instructions in class.

In order to grasp the current situation in question concerning teachers, the following questionnaire was conducted at the closing of an intensive training session for junior high school and senior high school teachers held in Saga prefecture in August, 2004. The respondents to this questionnaire were the participants of this training session: the total number is 106, 53 each at junior high

and senior high schools.

### 2.3.1 Taking STEP by teachers

The results of the questionnaire show that first, the number of the teachers who have taken STEP tests is not very large: 59 out of 106 teachers, which is only 56.7% of all the participating teachers. The data further shows that those who have the third or the second grade of STEP took it quite a while ago when they were at university or even at senior high school. This fact leads us to assume that most of those who do not have the pre-first level of STEP consider those tests unnecessary in teaching or are not motivated enough to take it being unable to find time to do so with their work schedule very tight. With appropriate preparations, it might not be a difficult task for them to pass the pre-first STEP because most of the participants seemingly had high enough English competence to handle almost all the activities in English at the training program. Therefore some actual measures to provide teachers with opportunities to take those tests should be employed so that they would take time to improve their own English ability on taking those tests.

**Table1:** Number of teachers who have taken STEP and their grades:

Levels of teaching	STEP grades		
	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>	Pre-1 <sup>st</sup>
J-1	2	11	3
J-2		9	1
J-3		4	2
E I	1	9	6
EII		7	1
OC		1	
R	1		1
Total	4	41	14

Note: J-1, J-2, J-3=1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> year in junior high school, E I =English I, EII =English II, OC= Oral Communication, R=Reading. When teaching more than one level they are listed at the lowest level. When those who teach OC or R also teach E I, EII, they are listed either at E I or EII.

### 1.3.2 The English use in classrooms by teachers

The second thing observed from the questionnaire results is that some teachers, especially at junior high school level, are trying to make good use of English for

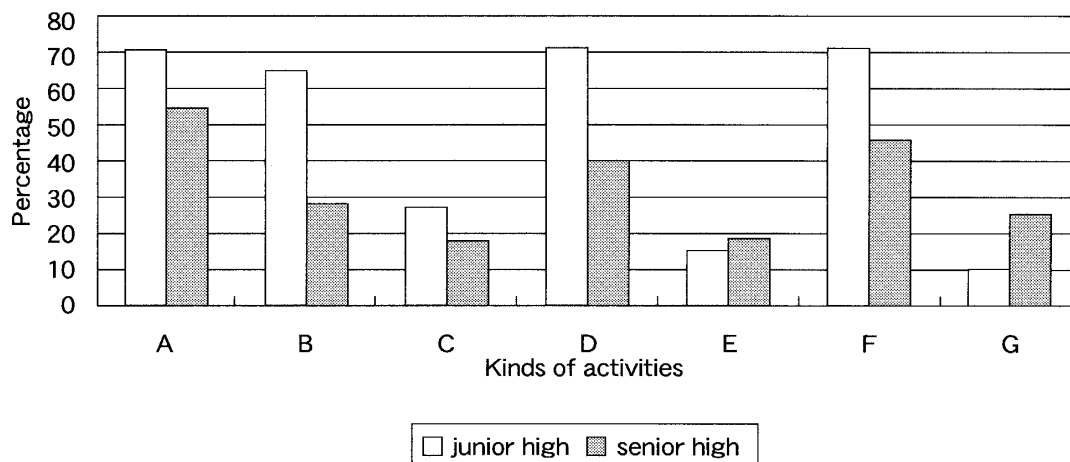
instructions in class. However, the overall rate of the use of English in classrooms by Japanese teachers is considerably low.

In the questionnaire, teachers were asked whether or not they do certain activity items in English and how often they do it. The questionnaire followed the categorization of activities adopted in the research by a working group on teachers' training, "Eigokyouin kensyu kenkyukai" (2002). Items classified in each kind of activities are in Table 2. As choices for answering the questions in the questionnaire, a 5-point scale was used, ranging from 0="it is not done in class", 1="it is not done in English", 2="it is seldom done in English", 3="it is sometimes done in English", to 4="it is often done in English."

**Table 2:** Activity items in classrooms

<b>A: Classroom instructions</b> (11 items)	
1 to tell students to sit down	2 to draw attention to the black board or the teacher
3 to tell students to be quiet	4 to give students praise
5 to give students a scolding	6 to ask students to speak louder
7 to thank students	8 to correct students' mistakes
9 to make sure students' understanding	10 to call on students to respond
11 to interact with an ALT	
<b>B: Small talk</b> (6 items)	
1 to greet students at the beginning	2 to ask students a day of the week
3 to ask students who is absent	4 to ask students the reason of absence
5 to talk about the weather	6 to talk about some news topics
<b>C: Reviewing</b> (4 items)	
1 to check homework	2 to give quizzes
3 to explain about exams	4 to review the previous class
<b>D: Introduction</b> (5 items)	
1 to introduce important sentence structures	2 to introduce new words
3 to introduce a lesson topic	4 to introduce the main text of the lesson
5 to teach pronunciation	
<b>E: Teaching the main part</b> (6 items)	
1 to teach for comprehension	2 to summarize the main text
3 to explain meanings of the sentences	4 to teach grammar
5 to teach translation	
<b>F: Practicing</b> (5 items)	
1 to give a pattern practice	2 to conduct communication activities
3 to teach students writing	4 to use songs
5 to conduct game activities	
<b>G: Summing up</b> (2 items)	
1 to sum up the class	2 to give instructions for the next class

**Figure 1:** Percentage of adoption of items as English activities

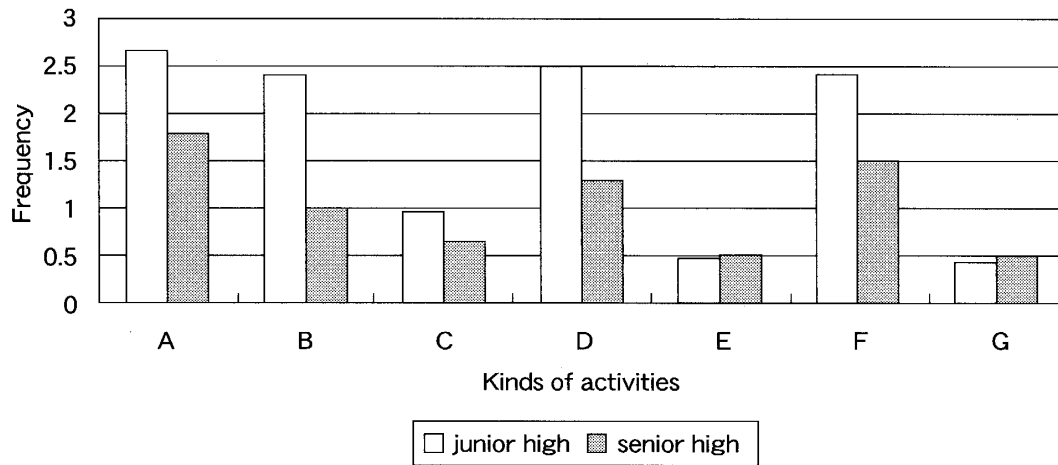


**Table 3:** Percentage of adoption of items as English activities

Levels of teaching	Kinds of activities						
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
Junior high	70.9%	65.0%	27.5%	72.0%	15.0%	72.0%	10.0%
Senior high	54.5%	28.3%	17.5%	40.0%	18.3%	46.0%	25.0%

The data shown in Figure 1 and Table 3 shows that four kinds of activities, A, B, D and F, have the adoption rates of approximately 70% for their items to be done in English at junior high school level. That is to say about 70% of the items respectively out of 11 items of classroom instructions, 6 items of small talks, 5 items of introduction, and 5 items of practicing are chosen by junior high school teachers as English activities. On the other hand, at senior high level, the highest percentage of adoption of items as English activities is 54.5%, which is for classroom instructions. The rest of the adoption rates range from about 20% to 40%, which reveals the very inactive use of English in senior high school classrooms.

While the data in Figure 1 shows only the rate of the adoption of items, the next data in Figure 2 shows that actually how often teachers use English to do the adopted items. Frequency level 2 in the Figure 2 indicates that teachers *rarely* do the activity item in English and 3 shows that they *sometimes* do the item in English. Therefore it is not appropriate to say that even activities adopted at the high rate among junior-high teachers such as classroom instructions, small talks, introduction, and practicing are frequently done in English in classrooms.

**Figure 2:** Use of English in class

Sakurada (2002) reported the duration of time for which English was spoken by Japanese teachers and students in English I and Oral Communication classes in a high school. In English I class, the longest duration of time for which a teacher spoke in English was two minutes and eight seconds (2'08") while students 5'45" in the same 50-minute class. In an Oral Communication class, teacher A used English for 21'07" with his students for 3'49" while teacher B used English for 5'03" with his students for 4'46". In this data, too, the rate of the English use in classrooms was rather low except one case of a teacher. Concerning the English use at college level, Kakimoto (2003) reported that college students highly expected for English to be used by teachers and students themselves in the classroom saying that "all the simple classroom instructions should be in English so that students can get used to spoken English", or "speaking English with Japanese people is less stressful", or "I have come to think it important for Japanese to use English even though it is not like native English."

With the present situation of the English use in classrooms not very active as shown above, we should find out causes of this situation and how we can encourage teachers and promote the use of English in class.

### 3. For the attainment of well-balanced English competence

To attain the target level of English competence for students and teachers, some clarification and ideas for improvement on certain aspects of English education are necessary. Here I would like to present two proposals for this

purpose: 1) a qualitative analysis of the target English competence, 2) an example for the improvement of teachers' training programs.

### **3.1 A qualitative analysis of the target English competence**

#### **3.1.1 Integration of four skills**

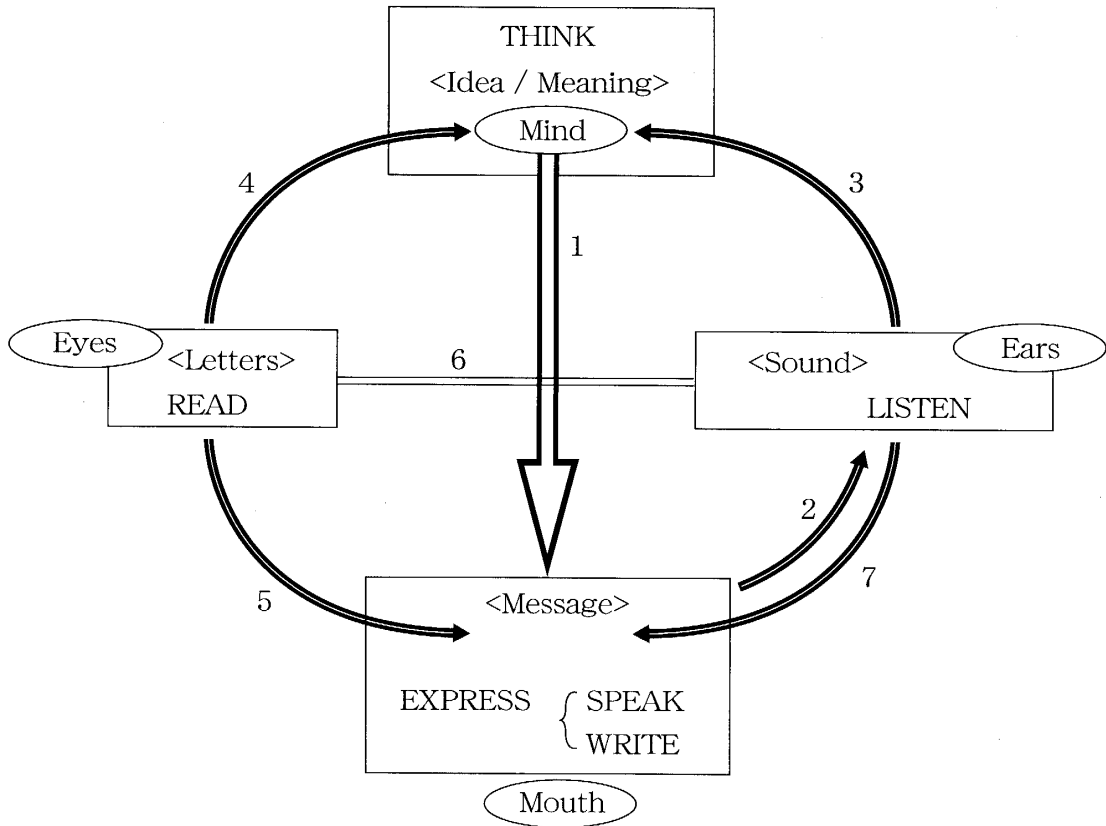
Every one would admit that one's communicative proficiency in English would never exceed his/her grammatical proficiency or vocabulary level of English just as one's linguistic competence of some foreign language would never exceed that of his/her mother tongue. While the Course of Study cites the importance of fostering the practical communicative proficiency in listening and speaking, what is desperately needed for Japanese learners is to master an efficient way to transform their knowledge of English into communicative proficiency: to develop a pathway bridging linguistic knowledge and communicative potential.

Needless to say, linguistic competence is the integration of four areas of linguistic skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking. It is rather impossible to concentrate only on enhancing communicative ability. According to Saita (2003), the English ability of the first-year students at senior high schools has been drastically dropping since 1998 that was five years after the implementation of the revised Course of Study in 1993. Now these students and the younger students who followed the same curriculum are at universities. Regardless of academic levels, the integration of four skills should always be noted in order to enhance real English competence of students.

Here I would like to propose a model of the "language use circuit" which simplifies how four skills, parts of a human body (such as the vocal organs and auditory organs) and linguistic media (phonological and visual representation, which are sound and letters) are related in a normal language use. By making use of this model, we can check whether the linguistic material being used for learning is functioning fully as language.

When we want to express ourselves in our mother tongue, an idea comes up in our mind and we put it in the flow (path 1) from mind to mouth. This is how we convey the message by speaking. When speaking, we are at the same time hearing ourselves using the flow (path 2) from mouth to ears, and then hearing ourselves automatically leads to understanding what we hear, thus the flow goes on finally

**Figure 3:** Language Use Circuit



to mind (path 3). When we read something written in our mother tongue, a string of meaningful letters flow from eyes as visual input to mind through path 4 thus they are transmitted as meaning of the passage through interpreting process as semantic representation. The meaning received in our mind usually evokes some idea as a response, then starts to flow as a new message through path 1. In the use of the mother tongue, the language use circuit is fully utilized in this way.

Let us think about how we are using this circuit in our English teaching/learning.

In a reading class, we tend to just translate English into Japanese, which barely connects visual input to meaning through the path 1 but often fails to evoke any responses in mind and does not produce the next flow. An act of reading should not be just an act of transforming English sentences into Japanese ones. Especially when it is done in class, together with other people not alone, an act of reading should be an understanding of the information written in English then



deepening the understanding of the topic by sharing each person's response or his or her opinion about it with other classmates. A reading class should provide students with opportunities to gain more understanding about the world or possibly about themselves and other people through an efficient processing of information written in English. When done in this way, an act of reading can activate the language use circuit using the path 4 and 1.

As a practice, a reading-aloud using the path 5 and 6 is a very effective way. This can be done most effectively when students intend to understand what is written in the passage while reading aloud, thus path 4 can also be activated. By reading aloud this way, students can use three paths of the language use circuit, path 4, 5 and 6, at the same time.

When a listening practice is done in class, two paths, path 3 and 1, should be used if it is for comprehension. Discussing each person's response even in Japanese is useful to activate these two paths in facilitating understanding of the content. As a practice, when students are instructed to repeat short words following their teachers, they can do it quite mechanically, thus only path 7 is used. But when they try to repeat longer sentences or do "shadowing", repeating the whole passage almost at the same time they listen to it, they also have to use path 3 since repeating a rather long string of sounds is almost impossible unless it makes any sense to the listeners. By a shadowing practice, learners can use both path 3 and 7, and also path 6, when transcripts are provided.

Language lessons as a whole should be designed to put emphasis on the use of path 1, which is the flow of ideas as messages. This flow itself should be considered an act of communication when there is a receiver of the message. Full utilization of this path 1 is achievable only with the support of a fully activated reading activity by utilizing both path 4 (from letters to an idea) and path 5 (from letters to a message) and a listening activity utilizing both path 3 (from sound to an idea) and path 7 (from sound to a message). With reference of this model of the language use circuit, we can see that communication is not just having conversations but an integrated act of reading, listening, writing, speaking and thinking.

### **3.1.2 Interaction in language learning/ teaching**

One of the idiosyncrasies of classroom situations in Japan is a passive attitude of students. This is partly due to a traditional notion of the teacher-student relationship that has promoted the one-sided classroom instructions, those from teachers to students. On reporting several factors of deterioration of the academic achievement level of Japanese college students, Ono (2004) points out that many universities are now finding a traditional style of class management where relatively a large number of students listen to one-sided lectures very difficult to maintain.

One promising alternative for the traditional style especially in the case of English classes is an interactive class style. Interactions between teachers and students and those between students themselves, which is more focused recently, have been considered highly significant in language learning. Sakurada (2002) researched on the relation between teachers' instruction language and the students' achievements in speaking ability and concluded that when teachers used more English in class not only to give instructions but at the same time to interact with students and facilitate the use of English by students, students' better achievements in speaking could be expected. Long (1996) proposed "Interaction Hypothesis" stating that "*negotiation for meaning*, and especially negotiation work that triggers *interactional* adjustments by the NS (native speaker) or more competent interlocutor, facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways." (pp. 451-452) Therefore we should enhance English competence which enables learners to perform more elaborate interactions with other interlocutors by means of language lessons that bring about as much interaction as possible.

## **3.2. A proposal for the improvement of teachers' training**

### **3.2.1 A sample plan for an intensive training for English teachers**

Presented below is a sample plan for an intensive teachers' training which was carried into effect, as it is already mentioned, in August 2004 by Saga Prefectural Board of Education as the second intensive training for junior and senior high school teachers of English in the prefecture in accordance with the five-year plan for promotion of intensive teachers' training in the *Action Plan*. The author

created and took in charge of a part of the program: 12 lecture sessions for three days. This three-day lecture session started on the second day of the whole program and was followed by three more days of communication training and the final day for taking TOEFL-ITP and the closing ceremony.

The objective of this three-day session was threefold: to gain confidence in using English as International Language, to learn effective methods for enhancement of English abilities for participants themselves, and to obtain tips on effective teaching based on new theories. Components of the three-day lecture session are presented in Table 4.

### 3.2.2 Assessment of the plan and possible revisions

The sample plan in table 4 received various pieces of feedback from participants, most of which were favorable. The item that attracted the participants' interests most is a method of teaching grammar through *noticing* process. Noticing is introduced as one of key concepts in language teaching by Schmidt (1990). It is in essence as follows: while input which becomes part of the learning process is known as *intake*, there is a particular interest in the intake of grammar as a result of learners paying conscious attention to the input; this kind of intake is known as *noticing*. Teaching grammar through noticing is almost at the other extreme of what usually happens in classrooms in Japan: a teacher starts to explain the rule at the very first stage of teaching, and yet this method is conceived to be attractive and effective by many participants. Disseminating this idea would profit Japanese teachers and help them improve their method of teaching grammar.

Another item participants evaluated highly is a method of delivering a reading class by integrating with other skills. In the framework of a reading class introduced in the session, students are lead to think about, listen to, read in English and in Japanese silently and aloud, talk about or write on the topic dealt in the reading material. In using various skills within one lesson, students can heighten their reading ability as a part of comprehensive competence of English.

Also appraised valuable by the participants is a notion of "the Lingua Franca Core" by Jenkins (2002). The Lingua Franca Core is explained by Jenkins as

**Table 4:** Sample plan for 12 lecture sessions

<b>Session 1</b>	Introduction to the lecture session Activity 1: an interview activity
<b>Session 2</b>	Lecture 1: "To be a confident user of English as International Language" 1. Who speaks English? 2. Advantages of non-native speaker teachers 3. What is an international language? --- introduction of "Lingua Franca Core"
<b>Session 3</b>	Activity 2: an idea for a warm-up activity---for reviewing new words/phrases Lecture 2: "What is important in teaching pronunciation" 1. Theory      2. Training
<b>Session 4</b>	Lecture 3: "The goals for teachers to achieve" 1. Reconsideration of the target English ability for teachers 2. English use in classrooms---introduction of 'Language Use Circuit' 3. Group discussion---sharing ideas to solve the present problems Lecture 4: Quick introduction to TOEFL
<b>Session 5</b>	Activity 3: an idea for a warm-up activity---using chants Lecture 5: "How to teach grammar" 1. Teaching grammar through "noticing" process 2. From "noticing" to performing a "task" Sample teaching 1: teaching grammar with <i>noticing</i> process and a <i>task</i>
<b>Session 6</b>	Planning a grammar lesson (a group work)
<b>Session 7</b>	Activity 4: an idea for a warm-up activity--- a short communication activity using effective pair work Lecture 6: "How to enhance your English ability"---how to use useful sources
<b>Session 8</b>	Training 1: integrating four skills, using TOEFL material Training 2: integrating four skills, using a movie and its transcript
<b>Session 9</b>	Activity 5: an idea for a warm-up activity---reviewing a reading class Training 3: integrating four skills, using a famous speech Lecture 7: "How to deliver a reading class"---significance of integrating four skills
<b>Session 10</b>	Sample teaching 2: an introductory activity for a short reading material Sample teaching 3: reading a long material with a focus on <i>integration</i>
<b>Session 11</b>	Presentation of group work (ideas for grammar lessons using <i>noticing</i> process)
<b>Session 12</b>	Closing

follows: "This consists of those phonological and phonetic features which seem to be crucial as safeguards of mutual intelligibility in ILT (interlanguage talk) (Jenkins 2002: 96)." Therefore instead of spending much time teaching the most difficult sounds in English that are most different from Japanese ones, we can concentrate on several core features of English sounds, which would lighten the workload of learners as well as teachers.

The participants gave several proposals for improvement of the program. Having an almost two-week intensive training just once in five years is not as effective as it should be. It causes difficulty in staff management at some schools. Possible alternatives proposed are: 1) to have one-day training once a month for several months continuously, 2) to have a three-day intensive training once in several months continuously, 3) to have the intensive training not for two weeks in a row but separately two times, one week at the beginning and the other week at the end of the summer break.

Another proposal made in regard to the management of the program is that there should be choices between contents of the training so that participants can only take sessions that are necessary for them. Also many of them stated that if any standardized test should be conducted, they would rather take TOEIC or the pre-first STEP test than TOEFL.

Concerning the content of the lectures, items some participants desire to be included are: 1) effective ways of class management according to the achievement level, how to teach students of the low achievement level, 2) a longer period of time to share the information such as problems they have at their schools and the possible solutions with other teachers.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper we examined the present situation of English education from the aspect of teachers. The results of questionnaire from 106 participants in the intensive teachers' training program revealed that both the rates of the teachers who hold a certain grade of STEP test and teachers using English for instructions in classrooms are rather low. We then acknowledged that there are three things happening in Japan that increase the demand for the higher quality of English lessons and good teachers' training programs. Those three things are namely

English teaching at elementary schools, the increasing use of listening comprehension tests in the entrance examinations and requiring the achievement of the target English level of all the teachers in junior high and senior high school.

We next gave a qualitative analysis of English competence providing a model of the “Language Use Circuit” and claimed the importance of integration of four skills and interaction in language learning/teaching.

Finally, in the hope of contributing to the improvement of teachers’ training programs, we proposed a sample plan and some ideas for its administration. Further steps toward realization of the situation where more Japanese people can use English confidently should be made by means of English teachers’ efforts. We ought to make more research on effective teachers’ training programs that would assist those teachers in attaining the goals of English education in Japan.

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