

Title	Motivation of Japanese elementary school EFL learners illuminated through the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL)
Sub Title	実験授業報告『TOEFLを通して照らし出される日本人小学生の英語学習動機』
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Publisher	慶應義塾大学外国語教育研究センター
Publication year	2016
Jtitle	慶應義塾外国語教育研究 (Journal of foreign language education). Vol.13, (2016. ) ,p.107- 134
JaLC DOI	
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Notes	調査・実践報告
Genre	Departmental Bulletin Paper
URL	<a href="https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AA12043414-20160000-0107">https://koara.lib.keio.ac.jp/xoonips/modules/xoonips/detail.php?koara_id=AA12043414-20160000-0107</a>

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# Motivation of Japanese Elementary School EFL Learners Illuminated through the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL®)

Ohgi Ito

## ABSTRACT

This article reports on the practice of an English Language Teaching (ELT) experiment at an elementary school in Japan, employing an international standardized test as a stimulator in a private school context. The introduction of assessment tasks and the implementation of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) Primary towards 11 to 12-year-old students revealed a strong learning motivation of young learners and their enthusiasm for the practical use of the foreign language. Although the discussion has been continuing about whether or not English language should be taught at an earlier age, the field of Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) is increasingly expanding, and the government policy has set the directions of elementary school English to be started at a lower grade. This article illustrates the impact of assessment opportunities and highlights the motivation of Japanese EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. The power of social values, including family influence, is observed and the experimental classes exhibit the strong desires of Japanese young learners to communicate in English however limited their abilities may be. The results could potentially contribute to the development of TEYL in Japan and suggest the need for further longitudinal research into motivational transition from elementary to secondary school English education.

## 1. Introduction

This study was undertaken with the aim to shed light on Japanese EFL learners' motivation in undergoing assessment and their views on learning English in an elementary school context. In Japan's education scenario, there has been a discussion about whether or not ELT should be implemented at an earlier age. Since the announcement of the *Action Plan*

to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities” by Japan’s Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT 2003), the field of TEYL has occupied the attention of Japanese people. Traditionally in Japan, ELT had relied heavily on the grammar-translation methods, and it was not until the mid-1980s that people started to call for the need for ‘English for communication’ and the method of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) gained ascendancy in the 1990s. Those changes were brought on by the growth of linguistic influence in international relations, media, travelling and communications (Crystal 2003:86-122) and the social context has influenced the direction of ELT in Japan. The field of TEYL has been no exception to this trend, and many express their belief that the ‘earlier is better’ in child second language (L2) acquisition. The number of young learners has been growing, and the government most recently proclaimed the English education reform plan (MEXT 2014) and officially announced that English language classes would be taught from Year 3 (age 8-9) in all state schools from 2020.

Meanwhile, private schools have a different background with a long history of ELT, and the institution in this article is a private elementary school in Tokyo with children from Year 1 (age 6-7) to Year 6 (age 11-12), who take English classes once or twice a week as part of their regular school subjects. From a teacher-researcher’s point of view, ELT has brought positive outcomes and strong learning motivation can be observed, although various factors, e.g. individual interest, aptitude, intellectual curiosity and influence from family or peers, seem to be deeply connected with their motivation. Interpreting this highly complex EFL setting can illuminate what plays an important role in stimulating elementary school learners and in what aspects the objective measurement has potential for TEYL. The experiment first commenced with the idea that the impact of an assessment could motivate the young EFL learners for further development as well as provide the teachers with meaningful factors about learning motivation.

For this experiment, a case study method is employed in order to portray what it is like to be in a particular EFL situation and ‘to catch the close up reality’ (Cohen *et al.* 2007:253). Empirical research is conducted on 18 Year 6 students with research tools such as observation and questionnaires, and the data collected from the TOEFL Primary attempt to illuminate the enthusiasm of Japanese elementary school EFL learners for acquisition of English as a foreign language.

## 2. Context

For this research experiment, it is essential to give full descriptions of background context, particularly of TEYL in Japan, and to throw light on the layers of context. Crystal (2003:59) identifies two aspects for the present-day world status of English as ‘the expansion of British colonial power, which peaked towards the end of the nineteenth century, and the emergence of the United States as the leading economic power of the twentieth century’, both of which can be evidenced in the history of ELT in Japan. From the mid-1980s through the 1990s, the method of CLT started to gain ascendancy, and the primary goal of ELT became ‘fostering communication skills’ for global stages (MEXT 2003). Some critics put in question the Japanese perception towards English language learning that reflects their belief in ‘communicative English for intercultural communication’ (Kubota 2002; Sakui 2004), and the changes to the trend for CLT have apparently brought confusion to schools; Sakui (2004:155) describes metaphorically that CLT in Japan is somewhat like ‘wearing two pairs of shoes’, taking on ‘a parallel situation’ where the teachers keep the grammar-translation approach for university examinations, while teaching ‘communicative English’ as required by the government. These historical and social backgrounds of ELT are deeply entrenched in Japan, and the field of TEYL began to flourish in the 1990s with great expectations from adults about young learners’ potential for ‘communicative’ competence.

### 2.1 Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL) in Japan

As indicated, the social context has influenced the direction of foreign language education in Japan, including TEYL, and the number of young EFL learners has been growing in spite of the fact that Japanese children have extremely limited exposure to foreign languages. There has been a belief that the ‘earlier is better’ in child L2 acquisition, and the government decided to introduce English language in all state schools from Year 5 (age 10-11) in 2011 and from Year 3 (age 8-9) in 2020 (MEXT 2014). The decision inevitably affected the whole ELT in the school context and raised issues from both extremes. Critics such as Otsu (2004) and Torigai (2006) argue that Japanese children are not ready to learn a foreign language and that early learning of a foreign language might disturb the acquisition of their first language (L1). Others fear that TEYL might take away the ‘identity’ as Japanese and suggest that ELT should be combined with other subjects such as social studies or intercultural understanding at school (MEXT 2006). Content and Language Integrated Learning has been advancing in Europe; however, this approach cannot be easily adopted into the environment where foreign language

exposure is limited and comprehensible input is sparse. Among these negative perspectives, Tomita (2004:18-20) advocates that linguistic input is not required for young EFL learners and that their 'awareness' to unknown, new things around the world should be the goal for TEYL. It has been a concerning issue what can be done to facilitate the foreign language learning of young learners in a 'low-immersion' context like Japan.

Under these controversial circumstances, TEYL has become a reality in Japanese schools and the focus is now moving towards what age would be the best to introduce English language as a school subject. In private schools, on the other hand, ELT has long been implemented from younger ages, since these schools can select their own educational policies with minimal control from the government. In the early years of CLT, the effects of TEYL activities such as chants, games and short plays were highlighted and researched mainly; however, the situation has changed, and several studies have revealed linguistic and emotional effects of ELT, such as Nishida (2013:93-109), who investigates motivational differences in age and gender among Japanese school children. At present, the link between elementary and secondary English education has become a new topic for discussion (Higuchi *et al.* 2008:58-69). Therefore, TEYL is still in the middle of pursuing methods and materials, and empirical studies are rather thin on the ground, remaining unexplored as yet.

## 2.2 English Language Teaching (ELT) in this institution

The institution in which this experiment was conducted is a private elementary school in Tokyo, and since the foundation in 1874, ELT has been implemented with original materials and methods. Learning English is a part of the school curriculum from Year 1 (age 6-7) and the class size in upper grades is relatively small for a Japanese school, dividing a class of 36 students into three groups (12 students each for English classes) from Year 4 (age 9-10) onto Year 6 (age 11-12). There is a unique assessment for the upper grades, offering the students speaking and writing sessions, and the whole course of study has been positively accepted, although educational research into learning motivation has been scarcely administered.

The Year 4 English generally carries an enthusiastic class atmosphere, but the dynamics start to change as the students grow physically and mentally; competitiveness between 'fast' and 'slow' learners arises, and parental influence on achievement becomes remarkable. Some parents provide children extra classes outside school, and others express concerns about children's achievement in the reports. During Year 4 and Year 5, the main focus of teaching is to get the students familiar with English sounds through chants and simple expressions,

not so much with vocabulary or structure. The Year 6 English classes introduce syntax with new vocabulary by degrees so that the students can prepare for secondary school English; in Japanese schools, English language formally becomes a required subject from the secondary education. Still, the Year 6 students are vigorous and energetic in learning English, thanks to their curiosity about different languages and cultures, and the milieu of a small class size enables them to speak out without hesitation. From Year 4 onward, the students learn English twice a week (40 minutes each), which is twice as much as state school students learn, and the proficiency level of the Year 6 students is assumed to be high, compared to other average Japanese school children. It should be noted, however, that their language abilities are varied and individual differences in motivation and competence are immense. In addition, parents play a crucial role in motivation with some, for example, believing that earlier learning would result in better achievement of 'communicative competence'. The learning environment greatly depends on each student's background, particularly in the private school context as in this article.

### 2.3 The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and TOEFL Primary for EFL learners in Japan

The TOEFL is a standardized test to measure the English language abilities of non-native speakers who wish to study at English-speaking universities or institutions, and it has been taken and accepted globally for many years. The test is designed and administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in the United States and the official score report is received as a certificate of applicants' English abilities by major academic and professional institutions around the world. In 2005, the internet-based test (iBT) was introduced and gradually replaced the paper-based test and the computer-based test. The iBT format consists of four sections, measuring four language skills, i.e. Reading, Listening, Speaking and Writing sections, and it requires comprehension and integrated communicative skills as well as academic knowledge for higher education. A significant feature of iBT is the quality and quantity of its content as the four-hour test is conducted by means of a personal computer with a headset and a microphone. Integrated skills are measured, for instance, in the Writing section, the test takers first read a passage, then listen to a related lecture, and finally summarize the whole content, typing within a limited time frame and word amount. In the Speaking section, various topics are indicated and some require the test takers to read a short passage, then to listen to a conversation, and finally to express their opinions or suggestions

on what has been previously presented.

According to *Test and Data Summary for TOEFL iBT® Tests* (ETS 2015), the score means (average score) of each country is published as a guide every year, and the data is primarily for comparing the performances of individual test takers in the same country, not for comparing countries by rank. However, the results provoke concerns in non-native English-speaking countries, including Japan, because the iBT format appears to be difficult and the low score might become a barrier for EFL learners to study abroad. With such a background, the TOEFL Junior for learners from age 11 and the TOEFL Primary from age 8 were introduced to meet the needs of young EFL learners around the world. Both tests intend to measure English language skills, guide to the next step of learning, and help both teachers and young learners to identify their strengths and weaknesses. The scores are mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels released by the Council of Europe (2001), and both tests enable the young learners to get accustomed to the test format and receive an appropriate measurement of their linguistic abilities. These junior versions of the TOEFL have been introduced in Japan, although the test opportunities are limited and the contents are not yet well-known.

The experiment in this article started with this background, reflecting the voices of former students of the researcher who intended to study abroad, but struggled to achieve the TOEFL scores high enough to be accepted to the overseas universities in which they wished to enroll. The experiment, therefore, has a mission to highlight learners' motivation as well as to enhance EFL learning by inclusion of an extracurricular assessment opportunity at school in Japan.

### 3. Literature Review

#### 3.1 Research methodology

When research involves children who cannot be regarded as being on equal terms with adult subjects, special attention should be paid to respect their freedom and self-determination. Thus, it is necessary to take into consideration 'the issues of sampling, reliability and validity at the very outset' (Cohen *et al.* 2007:49), and 'sensitivities' of ethical issues should be addressed. Another critical phase is that teachers have an extremely strong influence on students' decisions and actions in class, hence the participants should not feel coerced, nor suffer any disadvantages, retaining anonymity and confidentiality of their identities to protect privacy. For this particular EFL experiment in an elementary school

context, a case study approach is effective because it attempts to examine ‘an instance in action’ and to provide ‘a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract theories or principles’ (Cohen *et al.* 2007:253).

According to Nisbet and Watt (1984), case studies have strengths in that ‘the results are more easily understood by a wide audience’, as they are frequently written in ‘everyday, non-professional language’ and that ‘they can catch unique features that may otherwise be lost in larger scale data’. The findings might hold the key to understanding the situation and provide insights into other similar contexts. Weaknesses, on the other hand, are that ‘the results may not be generalisable’ and ‘they are not easily open to cross-checking, hence they may be selective, biased, personal and subjective’ (Nisbet and Watt 1984:78-79). The outcome of a theory-seeking or theory-testing case study might lead to a ‘fuzzy generalization’ (Bassey 1999:30); therefore, it should be understood that a case study may lack rigor with little basis for scientific generalization. Nevertheless, Simons (1996:225) welcomes ‘the paradox between the study of the singularity and the search for generalization’ and helps researchers to understand the characteristics of case studies.

### 3.2 Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL)

It was widely believed until quite recently that L1 acquisition was largely complete by the age of five, and it has been hypothesized that ‘children learn a L2 better than adults’ (Cameron 2001:12-13). Nevertheless, literacy skills of children are still in the early stages of development under school age, and some studies provide evidence that there is no such ‘cut-off point’ for L2 acquisition as suggested by the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH; first proposed by Penfield and Roberts in 1959), the idea that children can learn a L2 more effectively before puberty because their brains are still able to use the mechanisms that have assisted their L1 acquisition. Lightbown and Spada (1999:16) present some evidence for and against the CPH and they point out that if the goal of the L2 learning is ‘native-like proficiency’, the learning benefits from an early start, but if the goal is ‘communicative ability’ in a foreign language, the benefits are much less clear. In EFL teaching, the process of child language acquisition is highly suggestive; however, attention should be paid to different needs, motivations, and contexts of diverse learners. O’Grady (2005:164-175) admits that ‘there is still no real solution to the mystery of child’s language acquisition’ and the substantial indication is that the mystery cannot be explained by ‘imitation’ nor ‘teaching’. It is a popular idea that children



learn languages by imitating adults in immersion contexts, but the imitation cannot account for the speed at which children acquire vocabulary and language rules. According to Eyres (2007:26), children are in fact not very good at imitating sentences containing unfamiliar words and structures, and they typically repeat only what they can already say. Children often produce sentences (e.g. *allgone milk*, *come car*) which they have never heard anybody actually say before. Their language learning cannot be explained in one simple 'straight line' of progress.

Cameron (2001:14-15) asserts that different languages have different ways of carrying meaning, and that the particular ways in which a language encodes meaning act as 'cues' to interpreting the meaning of what is said. When faced with the new language, children try to understand it in terms of 'salient cues of their L1 and also pay particular attention to items of L2 vocabulary that they are familiar with' (Schmidt 1990:141). Generally, children are said to be more enthusiastic and lively as learners than adults, seem less embarrassed with speaking in the L2, and their 'lack of inhibition' seems to help them acquire a more native-like accent. Meanwhile, they lose interest more quickly and are less able to keep themselves motivated on one task than adults. Cameron (2001:xi-xii) claims that 'Theorising the teaching of young learners has an important role to play in complexifying oversimplifications about working with children and thereby increasing the quality of foreign language education'. When teaching young learners between the age of five and twelve, significance lies in the fact that they are still in the middle of development in their L1 and individual differences are remarkable; formal L1 literacy skills are still in the early stages of growth, discourse skills are continuing to develop. As a result, there is a burden on the teachers to provide exposure to the L2 with effective classroom activities. Young EFL learners attempt to make sense of the world in terms of their limited knowledge and experience, but they definitely need 'skilled' help in noticing and attending to various aspects of the English language.

The implications for TEYL that can be drawn at this point are threefold: firstly, if language learning is neither 'imitating' nor 'teaching', effective methods and programs (other than the L1 acquisition approaches alone) can be explored to facilitate the L2 learning. Young EFL learners in 'low-immersion' contexts like Japan have very few opportunities to 'imitate' or 'produce' the L2 in their everyday life, meaning that their learning approaches should be distinguished from the 'L2 immersion context'. Secondly, teachers play an important role to support young EFL learners by focusing their attention on useful sources of information, however limited their 'cues' are in the target language. Lastly, the process of L1 acquisition

and young learners' characteristics should be fully considered in TEYL, and the socio-cultural context needs to be examined as it exercises an invisible but enormous influence on learning motivation.

### 3.3 Assessing young EFL learners

The nature of young EFL learners might generate issues of assessment in need of attention: factors such as age, gender, the influence of L1, background context, the linguistic development and diverse learning motivation, all need to be taken into consideration. Cameron (2001:215) suggests that it seems 'reasonable to require an assessment to *serve* teaching, by providing feedback on pupils' learning that would make the next teaching even more effective, in a positive, upwards direction' [her italics]. Despite that, the reality is often contrary; 'assessment seems to *drive* teaching by forcing teachers to teach what is going to be assessed' and some of the classroom activities are restricted to test preparation in extreme cases. Thus, the assessment for young EFL learners is expected to 'identify the needs of young learners, to determine what level, if any, of proficiency they have in the target language, to diagnose their strengths and areas in need of improvement, and to keep track of their progress in acquiring the language' (Alderson and Bachman 2006:x).

At the same time, vulnerability might become apparent when the impact of assessment on young EFL learners is to be studied. Children are sensitive to praise, criticism and approval, and their self-esteem is influenced by their experiences among friends and teachers at school. Therefore, they need experiences that will help them to succeed and maintain enthusiasm and creativity; a lack of positive experiences might result in loss of motivation. The assessment has a power to change their learning both positively and negatively, and McKay (2006:18-19) asserts that effective assessment provides valuable information to educators, parents and students themselves, and the valid assessments are 'those that measure what they are supposed to measure'. The TOEFL Primary in this article can be classified as a 'summative assessment' to measure language skills of young EFL learners as well as an 'assessment to encourage and motivate' them. By utilising objective 'scales and scores for each language skill' rather than 'pass-fail results', the TOEFL offers the Japanese learners an opportunity to understand their English language abilities as well as to see the progress that they have made up to the present.

### 3.4 EFL learning motivation

In regard to learning motivation, Dörnyei and Ottó (1998:65) attempt to give a comprehensible definition stating that 'motivation can be defined as the dynamically changing cumulative arousal in a person that initiates, directs, coordinates, amplifies, terminates, and evaluates the cognitive and motor processes whereby initial wishes and desires are selected, prioritised, operationalized and (successfully or unsuccessfully) acted out.' Dörnyei (2001:46) also points out that the 'motivation to learn' is 'an intricate, multifaceted construct' on its own, but if the target is the mastery of the L2, 'the picture becomes even more complex'. He indicates two aspects of L2 motivation; one is that the L2 is a 'learnable' school subject and the results of its studies on academic achievement are of direct relevance to motivation. The other is that language is 'socially and culturally bound, and serves as the primary channel of social organisation in society'. The mastery of the L2 is not merely an educational issue but is also connected with social events that require incorporation of a wide range of factors in respective cultures. Gardner (1979:193-194) reveals the social nature of L2 acquisition and claims that foreign language learning in the school context should not be viewed as 'an educational phenomenon' in much the same light as any other school subject, but as 'a central social psychological phenomenon'. For school-age young learners, the 'school' literally represents a social arena, and the effects of the '*microcontext* (i.e. the immediate learning environment)' as noted by Dörnyei (2001:32-34 [his italics]) need to be examined thoroughly in motivation research.

The question remains, however, whether young learners' motivation is driven by an intrinsic interest in the field of subject (e.g. intellectual curiosity and preferences of challenges), or by an extrinsic orientation motivated by desire, for instance, getting good grades or skills in order to win teachers' approval or meeting external demands for higher education. As Dörnyei questions the '*researchability*' (2001:183) of motivation, what makes motivation research a formidable task is that it is not subject to direct observation but must be inferred from 'some indirect indicator, such as the individual's *self-report accounts, overt behaviours or physiological responses* (e.g. change of blood pressure)' [his italics]. What is recommended as a principal step for motivation research is to keep the level of this inherently subjective nature of motivation to the minimum, especially when analyzing motivational factors of young EFL learners.

## 4. Methodology

### 4.1 Research methods

Having taken the layers of context into consideration and reviewed relevant literature, the experiment in this article commenced with the question whether an assessment opportunity would stimulate the motivation of Japanese elementary school EFL learners and what motivational factors could be observed through the preparation for the TOEFL Primary. It was not the researcher's intention to make assertions on the learners' achievement from the scores or to draw attention to a simple interpretation of the small-scale data. The experiment was planned for 18 Year 6 students, due to the limited facility of the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) system needed for the Speaking test; prior to the actual test day, two preliminary classes were scheduled. The announcement was made in a letter to all 144 Year 6 students and 41 students showed an interest and applied to participate. With these circumstances, the participants were decided by lottery and all attended two preliminary classes to experience the mock tests and get accustomed to the test format of the TOEFL Primary. In addition to the recordings of the interactions between the learners and the teachers, a semi-structured questionnaire and post-interview were conducted after the test. A supplementary free comment space was included to gather various forms of 'self-report accounts' and 'overt behaviours' (Dörnyei 2001:185), and respective research tools are described below.

### 4.2 Research tools

#### *Preliminary classes prior to the TOEFL Primary*

The participants in this experiment carried diverse English learning backgrounds and their fluency levels varied, but the researcher had taught them previously or was teaching them in regular classes, so each learner's English levels were acknowledged. The relationship between the participants and the teacher-researcher was intimate and friendly, which made it easy to draw their true feelings and honest opinions. The preliminary classes were held on consecutive weekends, each for three hours, in order for the participants to understand the test content and prepare for the unfamiliar format. Two teachers implemented the lectures, one for reading and listening practice and the other for speaking, using the textbook "*Preparation Book for the TOEFL Primary® Step 1* (Kumon Publishing 2015)". The participants practiced answering a variety of questions and were given an explanation of the vocabulary and comprehension tasks. After this, they took the mock tests of each

section. Throughout this process, two observers were present from the TOEFL testing organization (Global Communication & Testing Co. Ltd.), who supported the test session and audio-recorded the lectures. Target factors to be investigated were categorized accordingly in relation to the post-test questionnaire questions as shown in Table 1 (see also Appendices 1 and 2), and the teacher-researcher, while engaging in interactions with the participants, took observation notes in written format, utilizing subsequent video analysis of classroom exercises.

**Table 1.** Target factors to be investigated through the preliminary classes prior to the test

<i>Questions in the questionnaire</i>	<i>Target factors to be investigated</i>
1. Did you know about the TOEFL Primary before this experiment?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Recognition of the standardized English test</li> <li>– Personal interest in assessment opportunities</li> </ul>
2. Why did you take part in this experiment and decide to take the test?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Specific motivational factors</li> <li>– Influence of family/peers/school milieu</li> <li>– Attitude towards learning English</li> </ul>
3. How were the TOEFL Primary tests? Which were difficult?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Fondness of the assessment/test content</li> <li>– Confidence or fear for speaking English</li> </ul>
4. What did you think about the Speaking test?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Factors related with characteristics of young EFL learners</li> </ul>
5. <i>Agreement rating:</i> The TOEFL Primary preliminary classes were good.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Fondness of linguistic activities</li> </ul>
6. <i>Agreement rating:</i> This opportunity to take the TOEFL Primary was good.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Attitude towards assessment opportunities</li> <li>– Learning motivation towards English</li> </ul>
7. <i>Agreement rating:</i> I would take the TOEFL Primary again if planned.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Future images of learning English</li> </ul>
8. <i>Agreement rating:</i> Further TOEFL test opportunities in affiliated schools would be good.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Perception towards learning English</li> </ul>
9. Do you wish to study abroad (either short or long term) in the future?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Motivational factors related with personal wishes</li> </ul>

### *Observation of the actual assessment and post-interview*

Observation is a strong tool for interpretive research and offers researchers an opportunity to gather 'live' data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen *et al.* 2007:384), although it is also beset by issues of validity and reliability. For this case study, the actual test

session was observed and recorded in written format by the teacher-researcher in accordance with the target factors shown previously, and for structured observation, four motivational domains clarified by Morrison (1993:80) were used, i.e. physical setting, human setting, interactional setting and program setting. For the Speaking test, two groups were formed to maintain the personal space while speaking to the microphone; one group contained 8 students, taking the Speaking test for the first 30 minutes, while the other had 10 students, who took the paper-based Reading and Listening tests for the first 60 minutes. The Listening test was played on an audio-CD player and took approximately 30 minutes to finish with the directions in English. To reinforce individual accounts, the participants' live and instant comments were extracted verbally immediately after the test and written into the form of notes. Post-interview was administered one month later when the test results arrived. Interviewing was beneficial 'to understand the world of children through their own eyes rather than the lens of the adult' (Cohen *et al.* 2007:374), and it revealed how the participants perceived the assessment. The duration was five minutes, and each participant was asked the following questions: 1) How did you like the TOEFL? 2) Were the preliminary classes and the test session beneficial? 3) Would you like to develop your English abilities?

#### *A semi-structured questionnaire to 18 participants*

Subsequent to the actual test, a semi-structured questionnaire (Appendix 1, translated by the researcher from Japanese into English) was undertaken with the 18 Year 6 students. The questionnaire is a useful tool 'for collecting data from a large number of respondents' and 'the information sought is not so complex' (Hinds 2000:42-3). The primary objective was to grasp the participants' interest in the assessment and their attitude towards English language learning. A Likert scale (named after its deviser in 1932, Rensis Likert) with five point responses was employed, as it was easy for the young learners to indicate their opinions by simply circling a mark which should represent their ideas most. A free comment space was included to invite 'an honest, personal comment from respondents' (Cohen *et al.* 2007:330), which might contain information that otherwise might not be caught in standardized questionnaires. Although 18 was not a sufficient number to yield a general tendency of young learners, the results contributed to illuminating certain motivational factors such as 'a sense of achievement', 'parental influence' and 'future images of EFL learning'. This experiment was not for generating hypotheses, classifying or categorizing; rather, it aimed to illuminate, interpret and describe what was observed in the practice of TEYL, informing 'on-going'

teaching and learning in a specific context in Japan.

## 5. Results and Analysis

### 5.1 Results of the preliminary classes

During the preliminary classes, all the participants showed strong interest and curiosity in the content of the test, asking enthusiastically about the meaning of each text and sharing the new knowledge with their peer group. As the TOEFL Primary Step 1 is specifically aimed at beginner-level young learners, both the Reading and the Listening tests carry a number of illustrations to match the correct vocabulary. The participants found them amusing and answered the questions with confidence. In latter parts of the Reading test, there are riddles and short passages with about 80-100 words in order to examine the test takers' knowledge of vocabulary and syntax as well as to test their comprehension speed in English. Contrary to the researcher's anticipation, the participants vigorously answered the questions and sought more detailed explanations in Japanese. While reading the passages beyond their lexical level, they made inferences with some verbal assistance and exhibited high motivation to answer the questions. This suggested that an assessment opportunity could give young learners much more than mere linguistic knowledge; a learning motivation driven by young EFL learners' pure interest in new things, not just to score good points on the test.

Similarly, the Listening test contains illustrated conversations in the beginning, but the later sections include several dialogues and recorded messages. The participants practiced oral reading of some scripts with approximately 80-100 words in the preliminary classes, but they struggled with the high speed of spoken English as well as the deliberate choices of vocabulary. Moreover, in the Speaking test, practical usage of the English language is required; for instance, the test takers look at several pictures and describe the situations in progress within 15 seconds, or in other topics, they watch an animated cartoon story and are required to explain what has happened within 30 seconds. The preliminary classes offered the participants an opportunity to exercise this format with the CALL system within a required time (Figure 1). The results displayed some remarkable behaviors, for example, some students uttered whatever words that flashed

**Figure 1.** Preliminary classes with the CALL system for the Speaking test (December 2015)



into their minds, or others showed puzzlement with the gap between L1 and L2, being unable to describe the situations in English. Nevertheless, the participants enjoyed the activities for the most part, indicating a positive attitude towards learning English.

## 5.2 Results of the assessment session

During the actual TOEFL session, several factors were identified in terms of motivational domains, following Morrison's categorization (1993:80) as shown in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Motivational domains observed in the assessment, Morrison (1993)

<i>Physical setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Physical environment of the test room and the layout of the desks created a serious, quiet milieu for the Reading/Listening tests.</li> <li>– The distance between the participants was sufficient for the test.</li> <li>– The CALL room was assisted with the teachers and the testing staff, which seemingly added a tense ambience.</li> </ul>
<i>Human setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Observable actions and behaviors were witnessed such as tone of voice, facial expressions and postures before and during the test session.</li> <li>– Most participants showed fear on their faces in the beginning.</li> <li>– Characteristics of individual participants were observed, e.g. puzzled faces when listening to the instructions in English.</li> </ul>
<i>Interactional setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Both formal and informal interactions were observed in the tests.</li> <li>– When each group finished with the Speaking tests, the participants moved and some interactions occurred among the two groups.</li> <li>– Some showed confidence in the Reading test, while others looked troubled, especially in and after the Speaking test.</li> </ul>
<i>Program setting</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Preliminary classes seemed effective as the participants had learned beforehand what to expect in the actual test.</li> <li>– Some participants cited they would study more speaking and listening.</li> </ul>

In the Reading test, most participants finished the section earlier than the time limit, and the score results showed that 8 students out of 18 obtained 109 points (the best score for the Primary Step 1 test), and 15 students (83%) reached A2 level of CEFR, scoring more than 107 points (see Appendix 3).

In the Listening test, on the contrary, the content was perceived as challenging, and



many of the participants indicated confusion in the latter section. As was hypothesized, the Listening test was difficult for the beginner-level participants, and the test duration of half an hour appeared too long for the young learners to remain focused. As a result, the scores varied greatly, and 6 students reached 109 points (the best score). Despite that, all of the participants reached A2 level of CEFR listening ability, scoring more than 105 points.

The most challenging section was the Speaking test, and the participants were overwhelmed by the time limit. During the session, some keyword vocabulary was presented verbally on individual computer screens, but the test format seemed far beyond their previous experiences with spoken English, with the result that the Speaking test was regarded the most difficult. In terms of CEFR speaking ability levels (maximum point score of 27), 6 students (30%) achieved A2 level, of whom 4 obtained 18 points or more. Another 11 students (61%) were graded at A1 level.

The actual session of the TOEFL Primary revealed that the Japanese elementary school EFL learners lacked the experience of listening to spoken English as well as speaking the language in authentic settings.

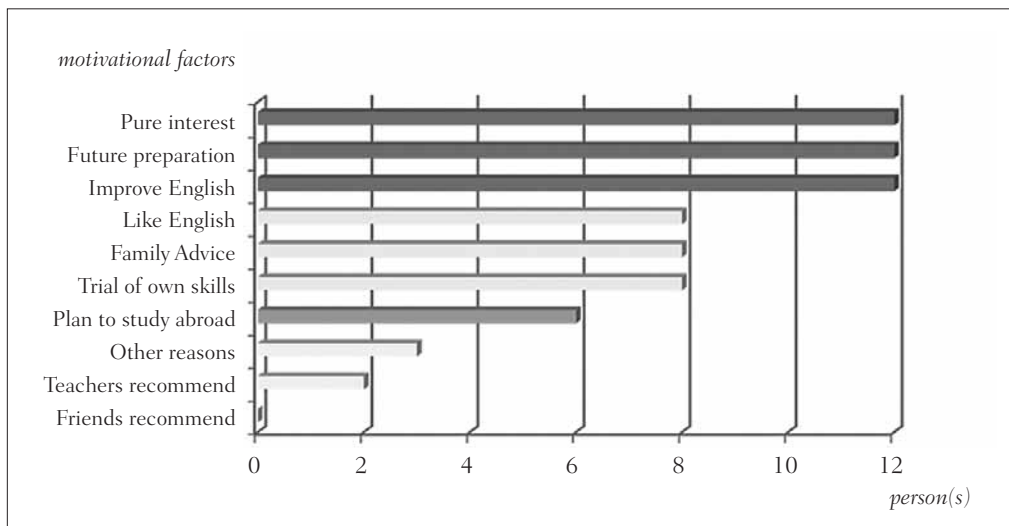
### 5.3 Results of the semi-structured questionnaire and the post-interview

The results of the nine closed-questions were analyzed with some charts from gross responses (Appendix 2); Questions 1 and 2 explored the participants' knowledge about the TOEFL and the reason why they took part in the test. Question 3 searched for the learners' perception of the test in regard to three language skills, i.e. reading, listening and speaking. Question 4 focused particularly on the Speaking test, investigating what aspects seemed easy or difficult to the participants and whether they became motivated or demotivated by the test format. Questions 5 to 8 related to the young learners' attitudes towards EFL learning and how the extracurricular assessment opportunity was regarded. Question 9 looked into the learners' interest in studying abroad, and the last space invited free comments, which were translated from Japanese into English by the researcher and listed in relation to two broad categories of motivational factors.

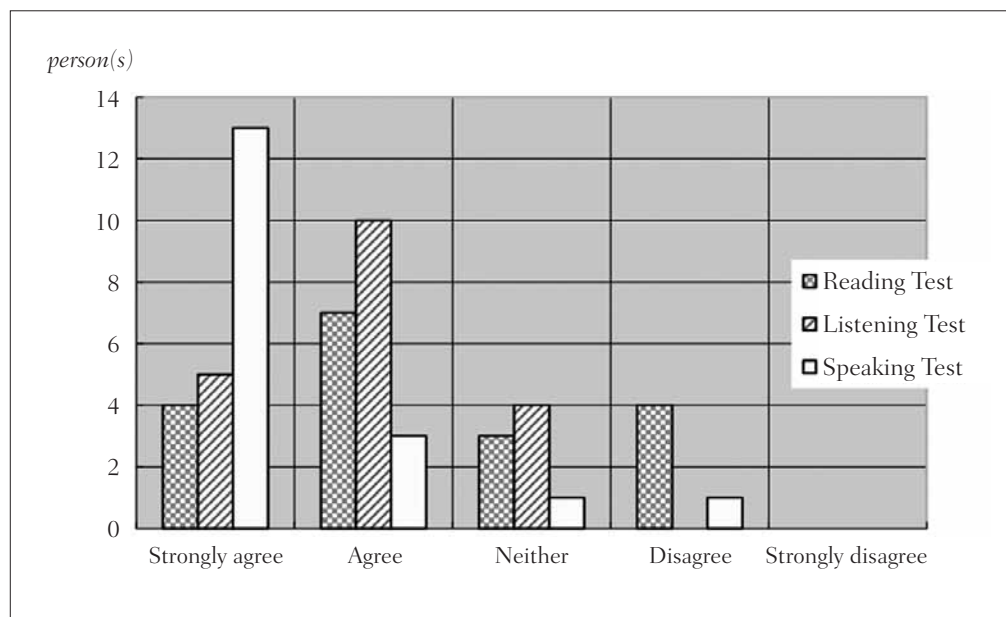
Question 1 was the premise for learning motivation, and three quarters, 14 out of 18 participants, did not know about the TOEFL before the experiment. Question 2 was directly connected with the individual motivations (Figure 2), and the top three answers were: a pure interest by the young learners in a new experience, preparation for secondary school English, and a simple motivation to acquire foreign language. It was shown that for young EFL

learners, family influence plays a central role; more than 40% responded that their parents advised them to take the test. Those participants wishing to study abroad in the future were strongly motivated and considered the assessment as a good opportunity for acquiring practical skills.

**Figure 2.** (Question 2: Why did you take part in this experiment and decide to take the test?)



Question 3 intended to find the participants' impression on each test (Figure 3), and the overall view was that the test was difficult, particularly the Speaking test. Roughly 60% thought the Reading test was hard, and more than 80% considered the Listening test difficult. Over 88% believed the Speaking test was 'beyond their abilities', according to their verbal accounts after the session. The results reflect that the Japanese young EFL learners are not accustomed to the actual usage of English language, and the test format is far too unfamiliar. Among them, the Reading test was perceived positively and was actually finished within the time limit. This implies that some young learners already possess a certain level of literacy and can read English texts to some extent.

**Figure 3.** (Question 3: How were the TOEFL Primary tests? Which were difficult?)

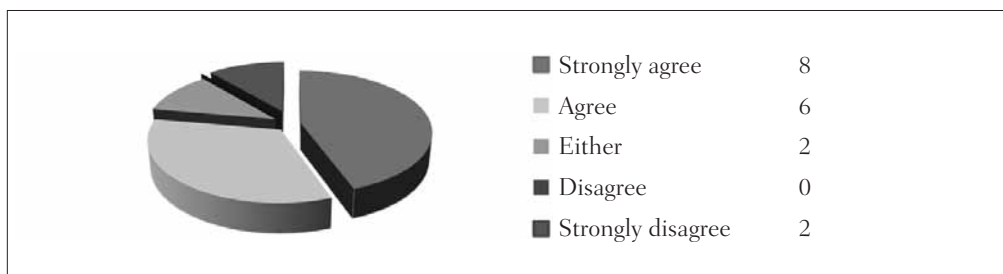
Question 4 specified what factors of the Speaking test were considered difficult, as the test format of using a microphone was unfamiliar to the Japanese EFL learners; nearly 90% agreed that it was their first experience to speak English to a machine. The participants also found the test content demanding and struggled to express their ideas within a limited time frame, although the instructions in English were understood properly. In regard to learners' motivation, more than 70% showed an intention to take the test again, proving their enthusiasm and a sense of competitiveness. The results showed the strong motivation of promising young EFL learners who are willing to advance their learning.

Questions 5 and 6 investigated the post-assessment impressions, and the results were 100% positive; the participants appreciated the preliminary classes and the assessment opportunity, verifying that the inclusion of extracurricular test opportunities is meaningful and could stimulate young learners' motivation. Questions 7 and 8 shed light on the participants' desire to take another assessment in the future, and the majority (77%) displayed eagerness to try again, although some negative responses were observed at the same time.

In addition, Question 9 explored learning motivation connected with the participants' eagerness to study abroad in the future (Figure 4), and nearly 80% agreed, half expressing

a strong wish. This implies that Japanese elementary school EFL learners feel it necessary to live in an English-speaking environment to become fluent users of English language. A powerful motivation was witnessed.

**Figure 4.** (Question 9: Do you wish to study abroad (either short or long term) in the future?)



Lastly, the free comment space collected individual voices and diverse perspectives on English language learning, which highlighted the young learners' subtle yet enthusiastic attitudes towards EFL learning. A supplementary question, "What English abilities would you like to acquire?" was added so that the participants could write their thoughts without losing focus. The responses could be divided into two broad categories for clarification, 'linguistic knowledge' such as vocabulary and syntax that the young EFL learners hope to acquire, and 'communicative experience' such as speaking and listening skills that the Japanese learners hardly have a chance to gain outside the classroom (Table 3).

The results of the post-interview reflected how the individual participants perceived the assessment and the responses were diverse, for example, "The preliminary classes were enjoyable, but I never expected the Speaking test to be that difficult." or "It was exciting and I want to improve my English." A large number of the comments pointed out the importance of English language learning for the purpose of school, business, travel etc. in the future. In addition, positive images of English were seen from their verbal comments such as 'It's cool to speak English' or 'I feel great when using English'.

Table 3. Voices from the free comment space:

Linguistic Knowledge (vocabulary/syntax factors)	
I want to learn more words and phrases.	I want to get better reading and listening skills.
I want to read faster.	I want to learn grammar.
I want to get more vocabulary, acquire grammar as well as composition skills.	I want to use English more accurately.
Communicative Experience (sound/communication factors)	
I want to understand English spoken in the movies and TV dramas.	I want to get English abilities accepted and understood abroad.
I want to be able to speak English without being too nervous.	I want to speak English fluently and travel around the world by myself.
English would be very helpful when talking to foreign people for the first time.	I want to work as a bridge between Japan and foreign countries.
I want to speak to foreign people with fluency.	I want to get better in speaking.
I want to speak with foreign people.	I want to be able to sing songs in English.
I want to be good at English so that I can understand what people are talking about.	I think grammar is important, but I want to get speaking proficiency too.
I want to know more conversational expressions and vocabulary out of textbooks.	I want to listen to English more and get better listening and speaking skills.
I want to explain the directions to foreign visitors instantly when they are in trouble.	I want to work on the global stage in the future, and English is necessary to get there.

#### 5.4 Analysis of young learners' motivation observed through the experiment

The observation and the questionnaire in this case study exposed to view various but fundamental motivations of Japanese EFL learners, and the experiment illuminated the elementary school learners' attitudes towards EFL learning. The free comment space particularly succeeded in gaining motivational factors in detail, reinforcing each factor to be narrowed down for further research. Some responses might be 'impressionistic' (Cohen *et al.* 2007:330); however, the comments mirror the reality of the present TEYL in Japan, especially in the elementary school context, and the significance of the data collected can be

summarised as follows:

- 1) The preliminary classes made it apparent that the participants perceived the assessment opportunity positively and considered it as a chance to test their language abilities. Parental influence is extremely powerful for shaping these positive attitudes and images.
- 2) The challenge of assessment means more than a mere measurement of language competence to young learners. The participants in this experiment found pleasure in gaining new knowledge and their motivation was driven by their pure interest and intellectual curiosity. The assessment can function as a stimulator and the elementary school students can obtain foreign language experiences with appropriate support from the teachers.
- 3) The questionnaire revealed positive images of EFL learning among the young learners despite the reality that the English language has no major role in Japanese society. An important implication for TEYL is that the social context plays a crucial role in motivating young EFL learners.
- 4) The participants were highly motivated and some possessed advanced language abilities for their age as the test results showed (Appendix 3). They appreciated occasional assessment opportunities, especially those who were wishing to study abroad. The issue to be discussed further is the link between elementary and secondary school English education; the experiment has opened a question to the present ELT curriculum, in which no linguistic skill-based subdivisions have been constructed between the two.

This was the first attempt for all the participants at the TOEFL Primary, but the results showed that the Japanese elementary school EFL learners possessed diverse motivations, and they found enjoyment in EFL learning. The experiment has illuminated the enthusiasm of young learners and their motivational factors for English language learning. As was observed all through the experiment, socio-cultural influence appears to be enormous in creating learner perception, indicating the necessity of setting appropriate contexts for young EFL learners.

## 6. Discussion: the impact of assessment opportunity and motivational transition

In this case study, motivation of Japanese elementary school EFL learners is highlighted through the course of study for the TOEFL, and the results imply that the inclusion of assessment might function effectively in TEYL. The motivational factors are diverse and the data indicates both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, the former mostly from the learners' pure interest, curiosity or competitiveness, and the latter from family influence, desires for appraisal or positive images of EFL learning engraved in Japanese social values. Occasional assessment opportunities like the TOEFL could stimulate young learners' enthusiasm, and high expectation towards global status can be observed. However, the question remains whether the young learners can maintain high motivation through puberty on to adolescence in the present EFL environment in Japan. Each young EFL learner differs in motivation and likewise in aptitudes for foreign language learning. As this experiment has elucidated, different motivations are originated in each learner's 'value mechanisms' or 'appraisal system' (Schumann 1997:2). A constructive outcome is the fact that the positive young learners naturally find pleasure in learning linguistic knowledge and acquiring communicative experience through the assessment.

On the other hand, as Nishida (2013:98) recognizes, 'motivation tends to decrease as students get older' and 'no objective measure of linguistic ability is available' in Japanese elementary school contexts. As learners grow older, linguistic achievement is required, and many EFL learners tend to weaken in motivation in Japan. Yet, the results from this experiment have contrasted young learners' willingness to obtain real-life communicative competence, and the participants possessed a strong desire for further learning. The problematic features of standardized tests like the TOEFL would be that the settings are always 'virtual', not authentic, which has often led to the question as to whether this would facilitate genuine communication skills. As the learners get older, the issue of 'authenticity' can affect their motivation, because foreign language learning tends to become a mere 'school subject'. The differentiations in learning motivation might call the need for 'individualization' in EFL teaching, particularly in school context, and a dramatic improvement in the link between elementary and secondary school English education is greatly needed. Along with needs analysis, a variety of teaching methods and techniques should become essential for elementary school EFL learners, and it is suggested that the young EFL learners in Japan would benefit from more effective, individualized English teaching in a smaller group and in an appropriately streamed form of learning for better communicative practices.

## 7. Conclusion

The experiment in this article has shed light on the motivational factors of Year 6 students in a private elementary school context in Japan and portrayed diverse motivational factors of EFL learning. Through the preliminary classes (Figure 5) and the actual TOEFL Primary session, it was discovered how the assessment was experienced by the Japanese elementary school students, and the impact of the assessment opportunity was closely examined. Despite the argument, the reality is that elementary school education adopts English language as a regular subject, and Japanese people consider it necessary for the future careers of the younger generation. The dominant power of social context including family influence has become evident, and the strong desires of young learners to gain communicative skills were exhibited in this study. The assessment opportunity could function as a stimulator for young EFL learners and as Cameron (2001:218) advocates, a tactfully practiced 'learning-centred perspective' should be assumed in TEYL.

The remarkable feature of the Japanese EFL context is that the positive image of acquiring English language is deeply connected with young learners' motivation, and a social 'value' conveys an immense effect on foreign language learning. The various factors cannot simply fit in one theory or generalization; however, the inclusion of assessment can offer important opportunities for EFL learners to see their linguistic abilities by an international standard. It is, therefore, recommended to create these opportunities regularly at school in order to help both learners and teachers to measure language skills and identify the next step of learning and teaching.

This experiment has also called for the need to explore further motivational transition from elementary to secondary school English education longitudinally. It is to be hoped that the voices of the young EFL learners in this experiment can contribute to the betterment of the field of TEYL in Japan, in some part enabling methods of effective learning and teaching of English language in school contexts to continue to be enlightened by further research.

**Figure 5.** Preliminary classes for the Reading and the Listening tests (December 2015)





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## Appendices

Appendix 1: A semi-structured questionnaire (translated into Japanese by the researcher)



## 一貫校から始めるTOEFL®Tests 講座

### 【Experimental Class “Starting TOEFL Preparation”: Questionnaire】

【1】 Did you know about TOEFL Primary before this experiment?

【2】 Why did you take part in this experiment and decide to take the test? (multiple answers)

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> I was interested in the test.         | <input type="checkbox"/> I like learning English.              |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My family advised me.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> I thought I could improve my English. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My friends recommended.               | <input type="checkbox"/> I want to study abroad in future.     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> My teacher recommended.               | <input type="checkbox"/> I want to test my proficiency         |
| <input type="checkbox"/> The test will be necessary in future. | <input type="checkbox"/> Other reasons ( )                     |

【3】 How were the TOEFL Primary tests? Which were difficult?

- |                            | Strongly Agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |
|----------------------------|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| ① Reading was difficult.   |                |       |         |          |                   |
| ② Listening was difficult. |                |       |         |          |                   |
| ③ Speaking was difficult.  |                |       |         |          |                   |

【4】 What did you think about the Speaking test?

- |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| ① Speaking to the microphone was difficult.  |  |  |  |  |  |
| ② I couldn't express myself in English well. |  |  |  |  |  |
| ③ Instructions in English was difficult.     |  |  |  |  |  |
| ④ I want to try the Speaking test again.     |  |  |  |  |  |

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neither      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

【5】 The TOEFL Primary preliminary classes were good.

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【6】 This opportunity to take the TOEFL Primary was good.

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【7】 I would take the TOEFL Primary again if planned.

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【8】 Further TOEFL test opportunities in affiliated schools would be good.

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【9】 Do you wish to study abroad (either short or long term) in the future?

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【Free Comments】 (What English abilities would you like to acquire in the future?)

Appendix 2: Gross results of responses for the semi-structured questionnaire (with original Japanese version, the numbers indicate the responses)



## 一貫校から始める TOEFL® Tests 講座

【2015年12月実験授業（幼稚園・受講者数 18名）】 アンケート結果

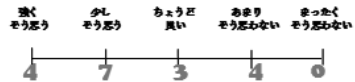
【1】以前から TOEFL Primary® を知っていましたか？ はい 4  
いいえ 14

【2】今回 TOEFL® Test の集中講座とテストを受験することにした理由は何ですか？（複数回答可）

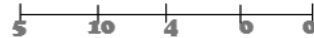
- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> 興味があったから 12     | <input type="checkbox"/> 英語が好きだから 8   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 家族に勧められたから 8    | <input type="checkbox"/> 英語の力を伸ばせると思ったから 12   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 友達に誘われたから 0     | <input type="checkbox"/> 将来留学を考えているから 6   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 先生に勧められたから 2    | <input type="checkbox"/> 力試しをしたかったから 8  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> 今後必要になりそうだから 12 | <input type="checkbox"/> その他（将来 TOEFL® Test を受ける練習を兼ねて英語と関わる仕事につきたい、楽しそう、とりあえずやる自分の力がどれくらいかるかわかる） |

【3】TOEFL Primary® Step 1 の集中講座とテストを受験してどう思いましたか？

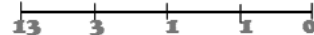
① Reading が難しかった



② Listening が難しかった



③ Speaking が難しかった



【4】Speaking テストについてどう思いましたか？

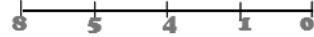
① PC 相手にマイクで話すのが難しかった



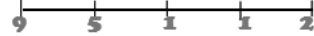
② 思ったよりも英語が口から出てこなかった



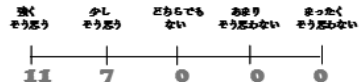
③ 指示がすべて英語で分かりづらかった



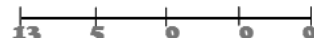
④ チャンスがあったらもう一度挑戦したい



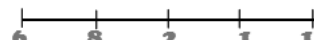
【5】今回 TOEFL Primary® Step 1 の集中講座を受講して良かったですか？



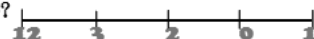
【6】今回 TOEFL Primary® Step 1 のテストを受験して良かったですか？



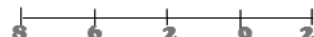
【7】次回 Primary® Step 2 の集中講座とテストの機会があれば受けたいですか？



【8】TOEFL® 受験の機会が今後も一貫校であると良いと思いますか？



【9】将来、留学（短期・長期どちらでも）をしたいと思いますか？



Appendix 3: [Upper part] Gross results of the open-ended question

[Lower part] Score results of the participants; the TOEFL Primary Step 1

★その他、自由記入欄（今後どのような英語の力を身につけたいですか？）

Vocabulary・Syntax の要素	
単語をもっといろいろ覚えたい	Reading や Listening の力ががんばりたい
スラスラと読めるようになりたい	もっと文法の力を付けたい
語彙力・英作文、文法を学びたい	
Sound・Communicative の要素	
ドラマとか映画を観て英語がわかりたい	海外で通用する英語力
リラックスして話せるようになりたい	外国の人とペラペラしゃべれるようになる
初対面の人ともしゃべれると役に立つ	将来、日本と外国の架け橋になりたい
ペラペラになり海外旅行に1人で行きたい	特に Speaking 力を伸ばしたい
道で聞かれてすぐに言葉が出るようになる	歌を歌いたい
通りすがりの人の話を理解したいから	文法も大事だが Speaking を身につけたい
日常会話や教科書にない言葉も知りたい	いろんなものを聞いて聞く・話す力つける
外人相手でも気楽に緊張せず話せるように	

【幼稚園 2015 テスト結果】

<b>Reading</b> score 109 ... 8 人	<b>Listening</b> score 109 ... 6 人	<b>Speaking</b> score 23-27 ... 0 人
108 ... 3 人	108 ... 2 人	18-22 ... 4 人
107 ... 4 人	107 ... 4 人	13-17 ... 10 人
106 ... 2 人	106 ... 3 人	7-12 ... 4 人
105 ... 1 人	105 ... 3 人	0-6 ... 0 人
<b>8割が A2</b>	<b>全員 A2</b>	<b>3割が A2</b>

