

# The Debate on English Language Education in Elementary Schools:

## Systematizing the Pros and Cons for Future Discussions\*

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### 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to (1) systematically organize the debate surrounding English education in elementary schools that has taken place since the late 1990s, and (2) provide implications for future discussions. The term “English education in elementary schools” (EEES) is used throughout this paper to refer to all types of English instruction conducted in the standard curriculum of public elementary schools. That is, it not only includes English as a formal subject but also English education in a broad sense, including English Language Activity in the Period for Integrated Studies (2002-2010) and Foreign Language Activities (since 2011). It therefore does not include English instruction in private elementary schools or extracurricular activities.

#### 1.1. A brief history of EEES

Here I will present a brief history of EEES in Japan (which I discussed in great detail; see Terasawa, 2020). For many years after the Second World War, English was not taught as a regular curriculum subject in public elementary schools. Since 1992, however, public elementary schools designated as Research and Development Schools began to teach English, although this did not become a national trend (only less than 0.5 % of the all public elementary schools taught English). In 2002, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) changed the curriculum and elementary schools were allowed to introduce English Language Activity within the Period for Integrated Studies (PIS), resulting in the explosive growth of the number of schools that began teaching English. According to the MEXT’s Survey of English Activities in Elementary Schools, 88.3% of schools had launched some form of English language teaching (ELT) program by 2003, and this percentage reached 97.1% in 2007. This expansion led to the implementation of compulsory once-a-week Foreign Language Activities for fifth and sixth graders in 2011. This program is a kind of foreign language experience or exploratory programs (FLEX) rather than foreign languages in elementary schools (FLES) or English as a formal subject, and thus it does not formally evaluate students’ performance. In April 2020, however, English as a formal subject was made compulsory for fifth and sixth graders (twice a week), and Foreign Language Activities became mandatory for third and fourth graders (once a week).

The introduction of English education in elementary schools was not a smooth process. Although

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it was welcomed by many people, it also received strong opposition from others. The pros and cons of EEES have been heatedly debated since the late-1990s by policymakers and educators as well as intellectuals, ordinary people, and even teenagers (as a part of a debate education program at school), so it can be regarded as a kind of national debate (Terasawa, 2020). Despite its ubiquity, however, this debate has not generally been well-organized; in some cases, it has been entirely chaotic. In fact, even many policymakers and researchers have made emotional rather than analytical arguments, which has created countless unproductive discussions.

This paper problematizes this characteristic of the debate surrounding EEES. In order to untangle these chaotic discussions and make them more productive, I will thoroughly analyze and systematize the debate and provide a general picture of the arguments.

## 1.2. Previous work

A considerable amount of literature has examined this debate around the pros and the cons of EEES. Academic papers that examine EEES often include a brief history of EEES, and some of them refer to the debate, citing several typical opinions or voices (e.g., Butler, 2007). However, these studies have failed to provide an adequate account of the debate in the following respects. First, the literature typically does not provide a sufficient volume of analyses. Although some studies briefly illustrate the debate, they seldom analyze it in detail. Second, previous studies have not comprehensively extracted the opinions and issues raised in the debate. Since most of such studies have picked out a few representative arguments (arguments that the authors of such studies regard as representative), the selection of issues/opinions may be biased. Third, the literature is generally non-analytical; it merely lists the selected issues/opinions without examining the relationship between them.

This paper will appropriately address the problems raised above. In particular, I will comprehensively extract issues from the debate, organize and systematize them, and present the broader picture of the debate. I will explain this methodology in detail in Section 2. Next, I will provide a detailed analysis for the arguments in favor of the introduction of EEES in Section 3 and for those against the introduction in Sections 4 and 5. Finally, Section 6 will summarize and discuss the findings.

## 2. Method

This study employed a qualitative content analysis of the related literature. Its basic strategy is quite simple: summarization based on extensive and intensive reading. In particular, I followed the procedures discussed below.

The first step was to extensively survey the literature mentioning the pros and cons of EEES (all types of literature including academic articles, general books, newspaper, magazine articles, and Internet articles) to obtain as wide a variety of opinions as possible. It is impossible to collect *all* the existing literature, so I completed the literature survey at the time when it was theoretically saturated.<sup>1)</sup> The second step was to identify and organize the issues. The original literature includes a huge number of unformulated arguments—for example, different people support/oppose it on virtually the same

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1) I have conducted EEES policy studies since 2004, and I have published many articles on this subject including a doctoral thesis (Terasawa, 2013) and a single-authored book (Terasawa, 2020). I have surveyed and examined a great volume of relevant literature, and I have experienced theoretical saturation many times.

grounds but used quite different phrases and rhetoric, whereas a single person argues for/against it for many different reasons. In order to classify these unformulated arguments into proper categories, I identified each argument and placed different arguments into different categories and the same arguments into the same category.<sup>2)</sup> As a result, I successfully extracted a finite number of arguments, as shown in the next sections. The third step involved examining the relationship between each argument and revealing the broader structure of the debate.

In this procedure, I conducted a descriptive analysis rather than a normative one, but I added some critical and normative comments on each argument. As discussed in the next sections, some arguments in the debate were highly problematic because they misrepresented a variety of facts in terms of the Japanese society, language learning mechanisms, and educational theories. These problematic arguments should not be presented “neutrally” without any value judgements, but should be described with strict criticism.

### 3. Arguments in favor of EEES

This section analyzes the arguments in favor of EEES. Despite the complexity of the debate, the pros of EEES are relatively easy to organize because the four main goals of EEES, as I revealed in Terasawa (2020), help us understand the relative position of each argument. Figure 1 plots the four EEES goals in a two-dimensional figure with the horizontal axis of “an educational content that is specific to English learning vs. one that is cross-curricular” and the vertical axis of “knowledge/skill-oriented vs. attitudinal-development-oriented.”

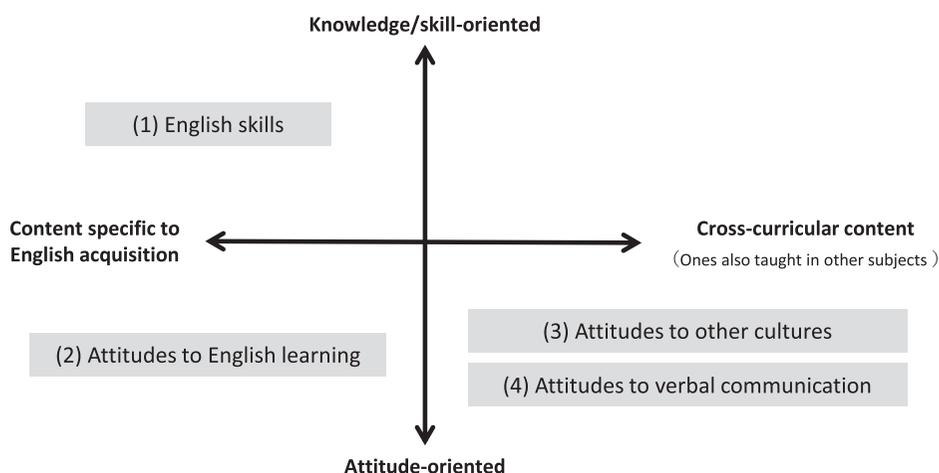


Figure 1 The four objectives of elementary school English

As Figure 1 shows, the pros of EEES are, in a nutshell, the arguments that EEES should be introduced because it is important to foster (1) English language skills, (2) positive attitudes toward English learning, (3) positive attitudes toward different cultures, or (4) positive attitudes toward verbal

2) I did not summarize each argument based on *by whom* it was argued, because this was less important than *what is argued on what basis*. However, this *by whom* question is helpful in interpreting what each argument actually intended to argue, so I always referenced the background of the person who made each argument.

communication.

These normative arguments usually involve several supportive arguments, which are normally descriptive (i.e., statements of fact). The latter arguments are easier to verify than the former ones because the validity of descriptive statements can be determined based on empirical data, unlike normative statements, which depend on value judgments.

I illustrate this structure by using the first type of pro-EEES arguments, that is, “EEES should be introduced in order to develop English language skills” (hereafter referred to as PR1). PR1 can be broken down into several descriptive statements, as shown in Figure 2.

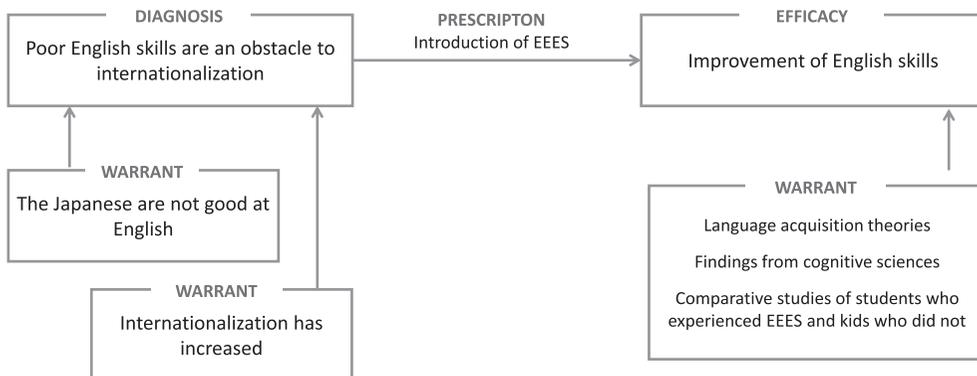


Figure 2 Pro-EEES argument 1: EEES to promote English language skills

In diagramming, I use the medical analogy of “diagnosis → prescription → efficacy.” This means that pro-EEES debaters have some sense of crisis about the current social/educational situation (this is corresponding to the “diagnosis” of disease). This sense of crisis drives them to propose EEES as a measure to solve the problem (i.e., “prescription”), which should have a positive effect (“efficacy”) in ameliorating the problem. Both the sense of crisis (“diagnosis”) and the expected effect (“efficacy”) usually consist of some additional warrants. Structured based on this medical analogy, the arguments in favor of EEES can be organized into six patterns, which are illustrated below.

### 3.1. PR1: EEES for English skills development

The first pattern of pro-EEES arguments, PR1, is illustrated as follows (see Figure 2 above). Increasing internationalization and globalization have boosted the importance of English language skills; thus, Japanese people should obtain a much higher level of English proficiency than ever. This is why English language teaching should start earlier (e.g., in elementary schools). This is probably the most common pro-EEES argument, which has been articulated by a wide variety of people ranging from academic researchers, to politicians, to intellectuals, to ordinary people.

Behind this “diagnosis” is an assumption that is seldom explicitly articulated. This assumption is that the *average* low level of English proficiency among Japanese people is the reason for their inability to adapt to globalization. Without this assumption, one can argue that even if the Japanese are generally not proficient in English on average, it does not matter because a small fraction of Japanese people who speak English fluently may be able to engage in globalized activities. In other words, this argument is only valid if one has a nationalistic sense of crisis that indicates that the lack of English proficiency among the *average* Japanese person may damage the national interest.

### 3.2. PR2/PR3: EEES for positive attitudes toward different cultures or conversation

The second and third pro-EEES arguments recognize that globalization has increased the importance of international exchange (see Figures 3 and 4).

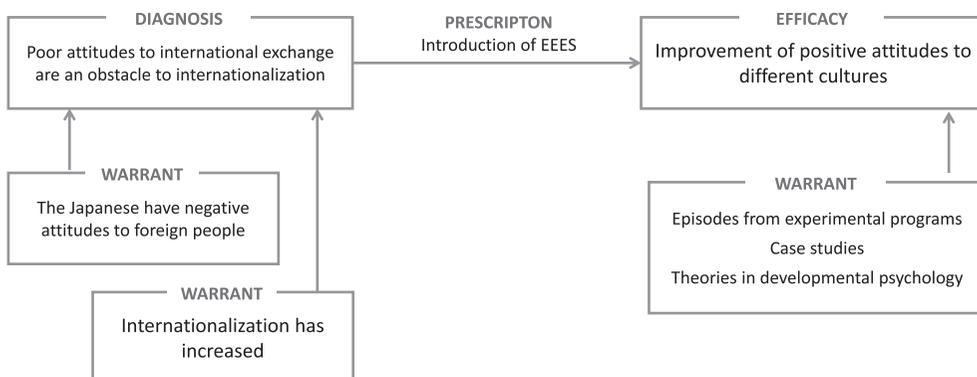


Figure 3 Pro-EEES argument 2: EEES to promote positive attitudes in different cultures

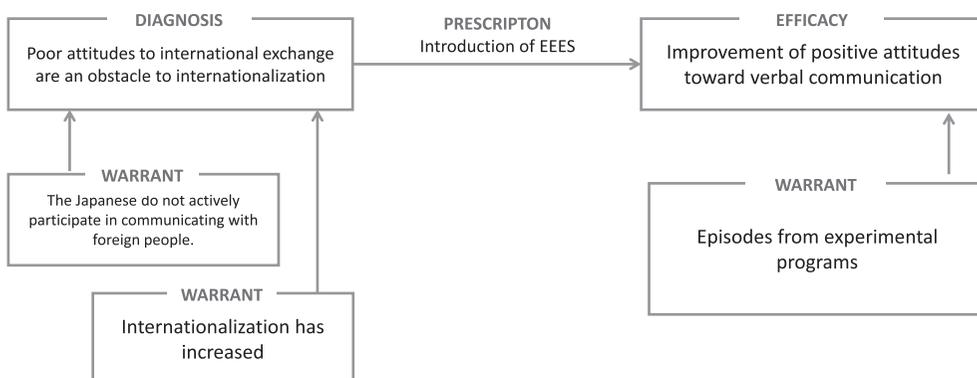


Figure 4 Pro-EEES argument 3: EEES to promote positive attitudes verbal communication

Like PR1, the proponents of PR2 and PR3 explicitly or implicitly assume that the Japanese have problems regarding international and intercultural communication, and that these problems make it hard for the Japanese to cope with globalization. These debaters argue that the Japanese are so inward-looking, homogeneous, and even xenophobic that their personality traits function as an impediment to internationalization. They assert that these problems can be solved through experience in English conversation; that is, intercultural experiences through English communication activities can promote international and intercultural understanding (PR2) and a positive attitude toward linguistic exchange (PR3).

These claims may sound odd because they largely diverge from a typical ELT program that aims to develop learners' English language skills. Considering the history of EEES in Japan, however, this is not a necessarily exceptionally peculiar argument. Rather, these arguments are common in Japanese ELT contexts because Japanese EEES was originally developed as a part of international education (a kind of FLEX), and because ELT in senior and junior high schools have officially announced that international understanding is one of its goals.

### 3.3. PR4: EEES to solve communication problems among children

The fourth argument, PR4, is quite dissimilar to the previous pro-EEES arguments. As Figure 5 shows, the supporters of PR4 argue that an increasing number of children (as well as adults) today are hesitant to exchange their opinions and feelings with others in their own language (i.e., Japanese language), damaging their (first-language) communication skills. To solve this problem, they argue, children should develop a positive attitude toward verbal communication by engaging in English conversation activities.

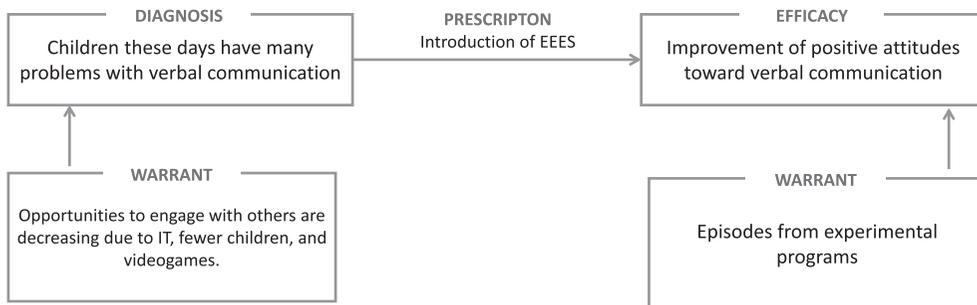


Figure 5 Pro-EEES argument 4: EEES to solve communication problems among children

Although this may sound nonsensical, it is regarded as one of the government’s official goals of EEES. For example, *the Guidelines for the Course of Study for Elementary Schools: Foreign Language Activities*, published by MEXT in 2008, states that:

It is believed that children these days lack the abilities to express and accept their own and others’ feelings and thoughts. In order for children to build rich human relationships, they are required to acquire verbal communication skills. Therefore, it is significant that Foreign Language Activities make students aware of the importance of these skills through the experience of communicating with language rather than memorizing many expressions or understanding detailed grammatical items. It is important to let students use a foreign language, which they are unfamiliar with using, and provide them with an opportunity to experience the difficulty of communication and realize its importance. (MEXT, 2008, p.13; my translation)

A similar account has been expressed in a more straightforward manner by various MEXT officials (the following quotes are my translations). For example, Kan Masataka, a former MEXT Senior Specialist for Curriculum, states that the background to the introduction of Foreign Language Activities is children’s “lack of communication skills” (Yanoura, 2009). He says that due to the declining birth rate as well as the growing popularity of video games, the number of children who “have few opportunities to engage with others and are unable to keep an appropriate distance with others” has increased. Since they “lack the ability to communicate with others through words,” he argues, “they resort to violence or bullying”; “in order to solve this problem, the Ministry has introduced English Language Activities in elementary schools.”

A similar argument was made by Naoyama Yuko, then-Educational Supervisor in Kyoto City and the present Senior Specialist for Curriculum of MEXT. Naoyama (2006) argues that we have seen an increase in “the situations in which we do not have to interact with people verbally, including conven-

ience stores and vending machines,” and this means that “we are less and less able to relate to people verbally and our zest for living gets weaker and weaker.” This is why “it is important for children to experience the joy of interacting with people through Foreign Language Activities.”

Both assertions assume that English conversation activities can promote positive attitudes toward the verbal exchange of opinions and feelings. In this sense, they seem to be a kind of assertiveness training in psychotherapy.

### 3.4. PR5: EEES for positive attitudes toward English learning

The fifth type (PR5) emphasizes the development of positive attitudes toward English learning (Figure 6). PR5 argues that EEES should be introduced to make children familiar with English language and to reduce children’s resistance to or dislike of learning. It should be noted that PR5 does not have “diagnosis” in its rhetoric, as shown in the figure. In other words, it does not explicitly articulate why it is important to develop positive attitudes toward English learning. In this sense, this rhetoric, exemplified by “It matters because it matters,” is unsophisticated, but the flaws in this logic do not seem to be well-recognized in the debate.

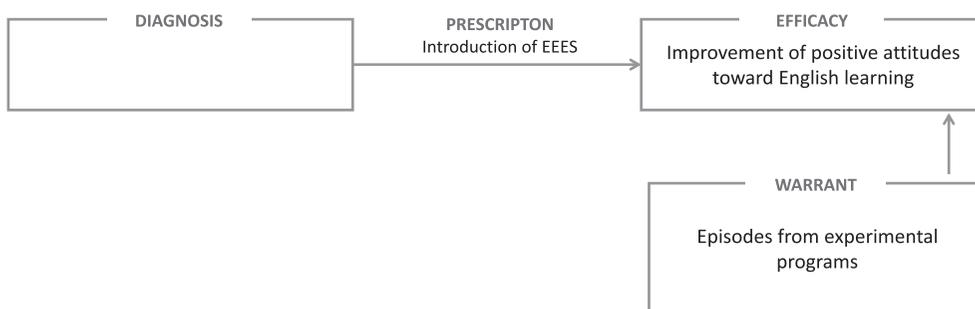


Figure 6 Pro-EEES argument 5: EEES for positive attitudes toward English learning

However, it is not difficult to speculate the implicit rationale for promoting positive attitudes toward English learning; PE5 probably assumes that these positive attitudes are important because they help children develop English skills. Although this rationale is understandable, it has also caused a considerable amount of dissonance with English Activities in PIS, which has officially announced that its central goal is international education through English language conversation rather than English language learning itself. This suggests that an excessive emphasis on positive attitudes toward English learning can contradict the goals of FLEX-type EEES programs. Despite this serious flaw, this contradiction is neglected by both supporters and opponents of EEES. Therefore, it is necessary to create a less contradictory theory to enable a robust conception of EEES’s objectives.

### 3.5. PR6: EEES for equal opportunities in ELT

The sixth type (PR6) argues for the introduction of EEES on the grounds that it will alleviate disparities in access to ELT and help create equal opportunities in English learning (Figure 7). In this sense, PR6 is largely different from the five types above, all of which emphasize the development of specific skills or attitudes.

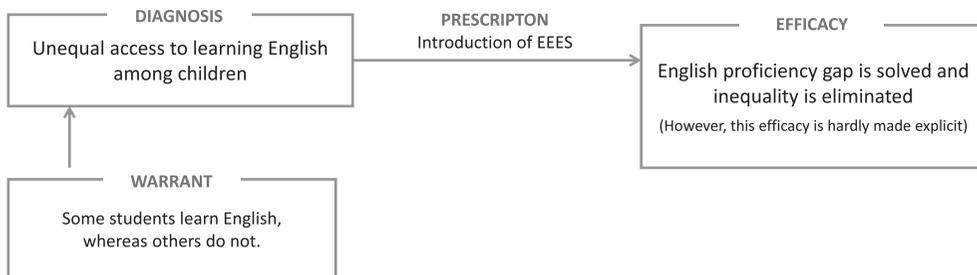


Figure 7 Pro-EEES argument 6: EEES for equal opportunities

The supporters of this argument call into question the situation in which some elementary school students learn English and others do not and criticize it for inequality. This disparity, they say, should be improved by making ELT mandatory for all elementary school students. This argument is not only articulated by the “recipient” side such as parent groups, but also the “provision” side such as the Japanese government; indeed, this is one of the official rationales that MEXT explicitly articulated for the introduction of Foreign Language Activities (MEXT, 2008).

It should be noted here that supporters rarely state what kind of equality should be achieved by EEES. However, discussions of equal opportunities in education normally make explicit what type of equality should be achieved. For example, a scholarship has been proposed to alleviate the educational disparities created by income gaps between families. In this context, scholarships are expected to ensure equality by increasing the percentage of students from low-income families that advance to higher education, ideally reaching the average level. Regardless of the effectiveness of this measure, the state of equality it aims to achieve is highly specific and tangible.

In the debate around EEES, on the other hand, there are very little substantial discussion regarding equality. The type of equality EEES is expected to achieve is rarely discussed (regarding whether it is an improvement in English language skills among children from low-income families, an improvement in cross-cultural understanding among these children, or another aspect of equality). Indeed, a considerable number of people, including MEXT, emphasize the importance of equal opportunities in EEES, but seem to fail to analytically discuss this issue. Rather, most of their arguments are sentimental, complaining of a vague sense of unfairness.

In contrast, the discussion of EEES in other countries is more straightforward. In South Korea, for example, where the issue of unequal opportunities in ELT has received much attention from policymakers as well as citizens, the English proficiency gap has been seen as a source of inequality (Crookes, 2017; Enever, 2018). Indeed, the South Korean government has taken a variety of measures to narrow the gap in English proficiency between less-affluent or rural children and their affluent or urban counterparts. In the field of the sociology of education, a notion called “parentocracy” has been developed, which signifies that children’s educational attainment is greatly influenced by their parents’ attributes such as educational aspiration or educational investment. Enever (2018), who conducted an international comparative study of EEES policies, points out that many countries, including South Korea, have observed “linguistic parentocracy,” in which parental factors have a great impact on the development of English proficiency. On the other hand, the EEES debate in Japan has failed to discuss this issue as seriously as other countries.

#### 4. Arguments against EEES: “It’s not effective.”

This section and those that follow examine arguments against EEES. The medical analogy mentioned above is also useful for organizing the opposing arguments. We can distinguish between the criticism against the logic of “prescriptions” and the concern about “side effects.” In other words, the former calls into question the effectiveness of the introduction of EEES regarding a specific outcome, arguing that it will not produce the results that proponents expect, and the latter is concerned about adverse effects of EEES, claiming that it may cause unintended harmful consequences, which proponents usually do not mention.

The majority of the opposing arguments are the latter type, i.e., “It’s harmful” type of arguments (HM), although a significant number of people criticize EEES with the former type of arguments, i.e., “It’s not effective” (NE). More importantly, anti-EEES debaters do not comprehensively offer a rebuttal to every issue the proponents have raised. Rather, they tend to only focus on a few pro-EEES arguments. This lack of comprehensiveness might suggest that people tend to selectively make rebuttals against issues that are relatively easy to refute. These type of arguments, known as “straw man arguments,” seem to be one of the reasons for the lack of productivity in the debate. Below, I will examine the NE type of criticisms in this section and the HM type of criticisms in the next section.

##### 4.1. Nine types of “It’s not effective” arguments

The NE type of criticisms can be classified as (a) it is not effective because its “diagnosis” (i.e., the perception of the current social situation) is wrong and (b) it is not effective because its “efficacy” (i.e., expected outcomes) is wrong. The pro-EEES arguments, as Figures 2 to 7 show, have four types of “diagnosis” and five types of “efficacy.” This means that in theory, opponents can offer a total of nine types of counter-arguments. These theoretical counter-arguments are summarized as NE1 to NE9 in Table 1.

**Table 1** Nine types of “It’s not effective” arguments (NE1-NE9)

Criticism against “diagnosis”	Criticism against “efficacy”
<b>NE1:</b> It is incorrect to assume the low English proficiency among Japanese people is an obstacle to internationalization	<b>NE5:</b> EEES will not improve English proficiency
<b>NE2:</b> It is incorrect to assume that the Japanese generally have negative attitudes toward different cultures and that this is an obstacle to internationalization.	<b>NE6:</b> EEES will not improve positive attitudes toward different cultures
<b>NE3:</b> It is incorrect to assume that today’s children have problems with communicational attitudes and skills.	<b>NE7:</b> EEES will not improve positive attitudes toward verbal communication
<b>NE4:</b> It is incorrect to assume that there is a disparity in children’s opportunities to learn English	<b>NE8:</b> EEES will not improve positive attitudes toward English language learning
	<b>NE9:</b> EEES will not reduce the English proficiency gap; it will not create equal opportunities.

##### 4.2. Pros and cons concerning the effect of EEES on English language skills

The biggest issue in dispute may be whether the introduction of EEES will improve children’s English language skills (and English skills of Japanese people in the long run) (i.e., NE5 vs. PR1).

The conflict between the pro- and anti-EEES groups can be summarized, in a nutshell, as PR1, who believe that the EEES program has a significant effect on the development of English language proficiency vs. NE5, who argue that such an effect cannot be expected or, if any, the size of the effect will be negligibly small taking into consideration the current educational environment of public elementary schools (number of class hours, curriculum, quality and quantity of ELT instructors, etc.).

The benefits of an early start can be classified into two issues: quantity and quality. The quantity issue concerns the fact that the earlier children start to learn the language, the more time they spend learning and therefore the more proficient they become, while the quality issue is that the earlier they start, the more efficiently they learn the language for some developmental (i.e., biological and/or psychological) reasons. Generally speaking, both issues are important, but the examination of the debate of EEES should only focus on the qualitative issue, because the pro-EEES arguments almost always presuppose the qualitative benefit of an early start. Japanese elementary school curricula only allow for 1-2 classes of English instruction per week (no matter how radical a reform is implemented, it will certainly not exceed three hours). It seems almost impossible for such a small increase in the amount of learning to be regarded as quantitatively beneficial.

The qualitative benefits of an early start claimed by the proponents can be roughly classified into three categories: (a) anecdotal evidence, such as “my kids (or my friends’ kids) started to learn English early, and they became fluent,” (b) “scientific” evidence such as neuroscience and developmental psychology, and (c) empirical evidence of studies that statistically compare children who experienced EEES and children who did not.

Of these, (a) and (b) do not seem to deserve serious consideration because the evidence they offer is similar to urban legends or myths. Indeed, some of the claims are typically what OECD calls “neuromyths,” such as “You should start early because your brain loses flexibility after age X.” Thus, what truly deserves consideration is (c) empirical evidence. This type of empirical research, called age effect studies, has been conducted around the world (e.g., Muñoz, 2006; Pfenninger & Singleton, 2017), and has also been conducted in Japan since the 1980s. The oldest study is probably that conducted by JASTEC Project Team (1986). In fact, some of the empirical studies of Japanese children’s English development have successfully shown the effectiveness of early exposure to English (e.g., JASTEC Project Team, 1986; Shinohara, 1998, Uematsu, 2015). Thus, they are often cited by proponents of EEES.

However, empirical studies also have some serious limitations. First, they have a problem regarding subject selection. Many studies, especially those conducted in the 1980s-90s, selected subjects/participants that were quite different from ordinary public elementary school students (e.g., those who attended private elementary schools or MEXT’s Research and Development Schools), making it difficult to generalize the research findings. Second, although some studies showed the positive effects of EEES, others showed negative effects. Thus, the empirical findings are totally mixed and fail to show conclusive evidence in terms of the effectiveness of EEES. Unfortunately, people in favor of EEES typically tend to selectively reference studies that successfully demonstrated effectiveness, whereas people against EEES tend to focus on studies that failed to do so. This “cherry-picking of evidence” may be one of the reasons for the chaotic nature of this debate. To tackle this problem, therefore, researchers should conduct adequate review studies that assess diverse findings and then synthesize them, although such studies, whether narrative or systematic reviews, are not yet available.

### 4.3. The “diagnosis,” a void of controversy

In contrast to the heated debate on English language skills improvement (i.e., NE5 vs. PR1), other issues are not necessarily scrutinized by either pro-EEES or anti-EEES people. In particular, there are relatively fewer criticisms of the “diagnosis.” Among several issues neglected in the debate, the following four issues are worth noting.

#### **On globalization.**

First, few people question the assumption that globalization or internationalization is progressing. Although this is often taken for granted in the debate, globalization scholars do not necessarily presuppose it (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999; Steger, 2013). Indeed, globalization theories have proposed a variety of definitions and perspectives on the term. Diverse definitions and perspectives, therefore, can lead to diverse evaluations of the phenomena, ranging from hyper-globalization to anti-globalization.

A typical example of anti-globalization in recent years is the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, during which global trade and migration stagnated. In addition, as I statistically revealed (Terasawa, 2018a, 2018b), this led to a decrease in the necessity for Japanese people to use English. Moreover, Brexit and the election of a US president that is hostile to free trade (both emerged in 2016) reflect some sorts of anti-globalization. Furthermore, the current global spread of COVID-19 has paralyzed a variety of global activities. In the debate of EEES, the possibility of anti-globalization or similar phenomena are seldom mentioned and (hyper)globalization is treated as an unquestionable truth. This one-sided discussion, however, is so unsound that ELT scholars should critically examine the relationship between globalization and the introduction of EEES.

#### **On Japanese mentality (*Nihonjinron*) myths**

Second, the assumption is rarely disputed that the Japanese do not have positive attitudes toward different cultures and communication and this causes problems with international exchanges and global activities (PR2/PR3), but it should be critically examined. It has frequently been said that Japanese people are inward-looking, homogeneous, and poor at expressing their opinions in their own words due to an excessive dependence on implicit communication, but these descriptions of Japanese people have been termed *Nihonjinron* and severely criticized as a myth by Japanese studies scholars and cultural anthropologists (Mouer & Sugimoto, 1990). This myth has also been rejected by an empirical study. Mabuchi (2002), through a statistical analysis of international surveys, found that Japanese people are *less* homogeneous in their opinions than people in other countries.

#### **On equal opportunity.**

Third, there are few arguments against the claim that EEES should be introduced for equal opportunities to learn English (PR6). Although this claim might appear to be undeniable because it is based on the supreme value of equality, it in fact needs to be analytically and critically examined.

Generally speaking, every difference in experience is not always regarded as unequal. For example, the experience of a violin lesson is obviously differentiated by family and social factors (for instance, children from wealthy family or living in an urban area are more likely to do), but this difference is hardly regarded as unequal because violin-lesson experiences are not normally seen as linked to one’s subsequent social, economic, and political success. In other words, the pro-EEES argument

for an equal opportunity to learn English (PR6) is based on the implicit premise that differences in English proficiency or other skills, in turn, will affect one's future education, employment, and life paths<sup>3)</sup>.

However, this premise leads to another contradiction. PR6, which argues that EEES will help eliminate the inequality in the English proficiency gap, is predicated on another premise that EEES helps foster students' English proficiency. This has commonalities with the same premise with PR1 (EEES for English skill development), but, as seen above, this is regarded as questionable by many opponents as well as some supporters (i.e., NE5). Therefore, PR6 is also not infallible but can be in stark contrast to other arguments.

### **On children's poor communication skills.**

Fourth, the perception that children today are less communicative (PR4) is actually dubious, although few people problematize it. This claim seems to be similar to what can be called the discourses on children/youths (the discourses that view them as inferior, non-energetic, and asocial/antisocial).

To understand PR4 concisely, however, it is necessary to identify the social contexts in which the argument was made (mainly in the 2000s) because during this time, children's and youths' communication style became a major social issue in Japan. For example, "seventeen-year-olds bursting into fury" (*kireru 17-sai*) was nominated as one of the most influential vogue words of 2000. As this case exemplifies, a specific image of children who easily lose their temper and resort to violence without dialogue began to circulate throughout Japan around the turn of the century. The terms "acute social withdrawal" (*hikikomori*) and "NEET," which were also in vogue at the time, also have labeled people in these situations as experiencing communication problems. On the other hand, as the labor environment has become more fluid and complicated, young people have been required to obtain more abstract and less standardized skills than ever. "Communication skills," which have been discussed frequently, is a prime example of these so-called 21st century skills (Honda, 2005). All these factors above—the discourses on children, a fear of juvenile crimes, children's behaviors that adults hardly understand, and the fluid and complicated labor environment—have made people focus on children and youths' communication. Excessive attention to their communication style and skills, then, seems to change our view of children. Kids who once used to be regarded as "quiet" or "a bit odd" seem to be more likely to be envisaged as experiencing communication difficulties.

A serious problem here, however, is that the children's or youths' communication difficulties are not predicated on any plausible evidence except for anecdotal episodes. In other words, this is something like a child/youth myth, but this myth has often been cited in the EEES debate and reproduced by some EEES proponents but hardly criticized by opponents. Unfortunately, it has been included in some governmental documents such as the *Guidelines for the Course of Study* (see 3.3). This situation is so academically and politically unsound that it should be critically examined in the future discussion.

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3) Although this causal effect of English proficiency on income or job promotion is often taken for granted, this is not necessarily true of Japan. I have statistically analyzed a Japanese labor dataset and showed that the causal impact is not significant or, if present, quite small (Terasawa, 2018b: Chapter 10).

#### 4.4. Controversy over “efficacy”

This section examines the criticisms against “efficacy” (i.e., NE5-NE9). However, except for the abovementioned skepticism against English skills development (i.e., NE5), this type of criticism is not frequently articulated.

More criticisms of NE6/NE7 against PR2/PR3 (i.e., skepticism regarding EEES’s effects on positive attitudes toward different cultures or verbal communication) should have been made. Indeed, PR2 and PR3 are worth critically examining because they lack empirical evidence. Hence, it is completely uncertain whether the EEES experience actually promotes the attitudes proposed. Furthermore, as discussed earlier, EEES was originally developed in Japan as a part of international education, so PR2/PR3 perspectives are of considerable importance. Despite the theoretical significance, however, these issues are hardly discussed in depth.

On the other hand, the criticism of NE8 against PR4 (i.e., skepticism regarding the idea that EEES will improve positive attitudes toward English learning) are sometimes made by some opponents. Indeed, among the most common counter-arguments against EEES is that an early start will increase the number of children who dislike, rather than like, English. This is not a simplistic argument, however. It claims that although the introduction of EEES do not directly make children unwilling to learn, this might be caused by a variety of difficulties and inadequate conditions in current elementary schools.

This issue is also pointed out by those who support EEES. In fact, they seldom express excessively optimistic views such as stating that EEES unconditionally stimulates children’s motivation to learn; rather, they often emphasize the crucial roles of well-trained teachers, a sufficient amount of learning, quality learning materials, school curriculum with consistency, etc. Although the importance of these factors is undeniable, debates based on such ideal conditions do not seem very productive because these ideal environments will always promote positive attitudes regardless of the type of ELT – ELT in elementary or secondary schools, or a public education ELT program or private tutoring. It would be more productive, therefore, to take realistic conditions as a premise of the discussion and examine the possibility that EEES will foster the skills and attitudes in such a given environment. However, this point does not seem to be fully recognized in the debate.

NE6, NE7, and NE8 are all concerned with a factual statement regarding the presence/absence of positive effects of EEES. In other words, their conflict with pro-EEES arguments (especially, PR2, PR3, and PR4) do not necessarily reflect different values among them on, for example, which goal EEES should focus on – English skills development vs. international understanding. Due to their empirical nature, therefore, these points in dispute are relatively easy to untangle, but they have not been empirically examined. This seems to result in a sterile debate in which the proponents of PR2/PR3/PR4 argue for EEES in a highly abstract and idealistic manner, whereas the opponents do not offer counter-evidence.

#### 4.5. Summary of “It’s not effective” arguments

In summary, although many of the pro-EEES arguments contain some questionable premises, they have been left without criticism, with the exceptions of the English skills development (PR1) and attitudes toward English learning (PR5). This seems to fully illustrate that the participants in the debate have been greatly interested in an aspect of English language acquisition despite the fact that MEXT has consistently emphasized that the primary goals of English Activities in PIS and Foreign

Language Activities are to foster attitudinal factors rather than English skills development. This governmental stance, however, does not necessarily reflect the actual debate.

Obscured by the heated debate on these issues on English language acquisition, many problematic discourses or myths have been circulated without much criticism (such as *Nihonjinron* and the discourses on children’s communication), some of which have even been included in governmental documents. The academic community (especially Japanese ELT scholars) seems to have a huge responsibility for allowing these problematic discourses to prosper.

### 5. Arguments against EEES: “It’s harmful”

This section examines the “it’s harmful” arguments. Since this type includes a wide variety of arguments that are difficult to systematically analyze, I will examine each argument individually. Table 2 shows all of the “it’s harmful” arguments that are examined (HM1 to HM10).

**Table 2 Ten types of the “It’s harmful” objections**

Arguments	
On children’s English language skills and learning	Elementary school teachers are not sufficiently trained in ELT; therefore, <b>HM1</b> it will cause children to acquire incorrect English usage and pronunciation; or <b>HM2</b> it will make them unwilling to learn English.
On cognitive abilities	<b>HM3</b> EEES will confuse children regarding their native language. Instead of the introduction of EEES, the total hours of Japanese language lessons will decrease; therefore <b>HM4</b> it will damage children’s Japanese skills; or <b>HM5</b> it will be harmful for their academic performance in general.
On attitudes to languages	EEES will lead to an excessive emphasis on English; therefore, <b>HM6</b> it will make children think of English as the sole foreign language worth studying and disregard other languages; or <b>HM7</b> it will make them lose their Japanese identity.
On teacher’s burden	<b>HM8</b> The introduction of EEES will too greatly increase teacher’s work.
On children’s burden	<b>HM9</b> Learning English will require a huge cognitive load, and it will be a big burden for children. <b>HM10</b> Due to the introduction of EEES, many private junior high schools will introduce English as a subject for entrance examinations. This will accelerate an “examination war” among children.

#### 5.1. HM1/HM2: Negative effects on English skills and learning

One of the most typical anti-EEES arguments is the criticism that, since public elementary schools generally lack an adequate learning and educational environment for ELT, teaching English in such schools is harmful rather than beneficial for children’s English language skills and learning (HM1 and HM2). These arguments reflect widespread concerns about the teaching of EEES by homeroom teachers, who are not usually trained in English language instruction. Since the 1990s in Japan, it has been standard for homeroom teachers, rather than English language teachers, to teach English in elementary schools. This has led to two main concerns: one concerns the limited level of English proficiency among homeroom teachers and the other is related to their skills and experience for English instruction (e.g., knowledge of second-language teaching methods and English linguistics and phonetics). Among them, the concern is often voiced that such teachers might teach children the wrong pronunciation and grammar.

## Responses to objections

In response to the HM1/HM2 arguments, proponents have mainly reacted in the following two ways. The first is an optimistic response that states that the concerns raised in HM1/HM2 will not become a reality. They argue that even if elementary school teachers lack experience in teaching English, it will not be highly problematic because the instruction is limited to a basic level and can be compensated for by a variety of supportive measures such as teaching assistants, instructional devices, and well-developed teachers' guides. The second response, on the other hand, concerns a more fundamental ELT philosophy. Some proponents criticize HM1/HM2 for their misunderstanding of the real goals of EEES, arguing that we should not recognize teachers' lack of experience of ELT as a problem, but should focus on their special techniques and profound experience as homeroom teachers.

Here is a further explanation on the second response. As discussed earlier, EEES in Japan has developed as a part of international education (a kind of FLEX), rather than a traditional ELT (i.e., FLES) that aims at promoting learners' English proficiency (and this FLEX-like orientation was the government's official stance at least until the 2010s). For this reason, some (although not many) of the proponents have emphasized the experiential aspect of the EEES activities and attitudinal development rather than English skills development. For these proponents, therefore, the accusations against elementary school teachers' lack of English skills and teaching experiences are too FLES-oriented and too biased toward the traditional view of ELT, and hence fail to recognize the real objectives of EEES. Matsukawa Reiko, one of the leading proponents of the FLEX-type EEES programs, states that it is worthwhile for English to be taught by homeroom teachers, who are not necessarily proficient in English (Matsukawa, 2004, pp. 36-37). She argues that it is particularly essential that EEES should be taught by "ordinary" elementary school teachers (i.e., homeroom teachers: HRTs) rather than Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) or Japanese Teachers of English (JTEs). According to her, HRTs have much greater advantages than ALTs or JTEs, as they are more skillful at managing classrooms, providing children with adequate feedback and assessments, and developing a feasible but innovative curriculum.

## Critical comments on the two counter-arguments against HM1/HM2

Since both proponents and opponents admit that HRTs generally do not have sufficient experience of ELT, the point in dispute on this issue can be divided into the following three positions. The first position is HM1/HM2, which asserts that this lack of experience is in fact problematic. The second is held by some proponents who argue that, although it appears to be a problem, it can be solved by relying on various human resources outside classrooms such as ALTs, English-speaking volunteers, and junior/senior high school English language teachers. The third position is held by other proponents who stress that their lack of experience does not matter for a FLEX-type English education program. The conflict between the proponents (the second vs. the third positions above) illustrates the diversity of the pro-EEES arguments, which means that those with totally different views of English education have supported the introduction of EEES based on totally different grounds.

The second position above (i.e., the introduction of external human resources can solve the problem), which appears plausible in general terms, should be evaluated in terms of its feasibility. In other words, this proposal should be scrutinized from the perspectives of, for example, how practical the measures are for compensating for HRTs' lack of teaching experience and how likely it is to be achieved. However, these questions are seldom raised, partly because there is little information and

data on the feasibility. Even the proponents of this proposal seldom provide any information on financial estimates or successful cases of the introduction of external human resources, making the debate highly idealistic and abstract. Taking into consideration the recent school circumstance, however, this proposal seems to prove to have been an overly optimistic prediction. The introduction of external human resources into classrooms involves multiple legal and institutional obstacles, making it difficult to adopt a radical measure to recruit a sufficient number of teachers and teaching assistants – in short, the proposal was something like a pie in the sky.

The third position (i.e., the statement that HRTs have more advantages in EEES) was a compelling argument at least in the 1990s to the 2000s, as the government also supported this position. If a program is officially established as FLEX, then it should be strictly criticized to evaluate HRTs' roles only in terms of English language tutors and underestimate their capabilities. In the 2010s, however, the Japanese government decided to introduce English as a formal subject in 2020 and explicitly shifted its orientation away from FLEX to FLES. Thus, these FLEX-oriented counter-arguments seem to have become obsolete in the late 2010s. In fact, the educational and academic communities of the 2010s were flooded with arguments that repeatedly referred to an urgent need for HRTs to improve English language skills and English teaching experience.

## **5.2. HM3/HM4/HM5: Negative effects on cognitive abilities**

Probably the most well-known anti-EEES argument is the claim that EEES will damage children's Japanese language skills. This argument can be found in a great variety of media, ranging from newspaper editorials, to intellectuals' essays, to politicians' statements, to blog posts by ordinary people. In 2006, one of the most well-known statements was made by Ibuki Bunmei, an influential politician and then-Minister of MEXT, who said "beautiful Japanese is important and we do not need to make EEES compulsory." In the previous year, in his record-breaking best-selling book, Fujiwara Masahiko, a mathematician and conservative intellectual, also criticized EEES for its possible threat to Japanese language development among children (Fujiwara, 2005).

It should be noted that concerns about decline in Japanese language skills can be divided into two patterns. The first type (HM3) is concerned about the possibility that early exposure to a foreign language confuses children's mother tongue (Japanese in this case) and not only their second language but first language may also remain underdeveloped (so-called "semilingualism"). The second type (HM4) is concerned about the possibility that the introduction of EEES will lead to a reduction in the number of classes for other subjects, especially, Japanese language, and this will negatively affect children's Japanese skills. The difference, in a nutshell, is that whereas HM4 focuses on the school curriculum system, HM3 focuses on linguistic and cognitive development. However, no theories in second language acquisition or cognitive sciences support HM3's claim that an early exposure to second language leads to linguistic confusion, and notions like semilingualism have been totally rejected as myths (MacSwan, 2000).

This means that some anti-EEES arguments are, in fact, awkward, poorly-grounded, and full of fallacies, and this seems to stimulate proponents to make rebuttals to these fallacious arguments. For example, some proponents cite the existence of a huge number of bilingual people who have fully developed two languages and argue that learning multiple languages does not confuse learners regarding their native language. Others criticize the notion of so-called "semilinguals" for its prejudice against bilingual people as well as its misunderstanding of second-language learning. This myth has been

sometimes criticized by even anti-EEES debaters. Otsu Yukio, a linguist and cognitive scientist as well as one of the leading opponents of EEES, has also expressed his frustration with the fact that his argument is sometimes equated with this fallacious claim (Otsu, 2006).

In contrast, HM4's logic, that is, "the introduction of EEES → fewer hours of Japanese language instructions → decrease in Japanese language skills," does not contradict second language acquisition and cognitive sciences. In reality, however, the introduction of EEES did not lead to the reduction in Japanese language classes. In 2011, when Foreign Language Activities was introduced, and in 2020, when English as a formal subject was introduced, it was PIS, not Japanese, that reduced the total number of classes in exchange for an increase in English classes. This is partly because the government always recognized Japanese language as an essential subject. Indeed, the government's English education policies have long been nationalist in nature, aiming at fostering Japanese people with English abilities who are strong enough to compete in a globalized world with their Japanese identity steadily maintained, rather than cosmopolitans who are proficient in two or more languages (Kubota, 2012). Therefore, it is understandable that the introduction of EEES did not reduce the total hours spent on Japanese language education.

### **5.3. HM6/HM7: A biased view of English and other languages**

Both HM6 and HM7 are concerned about the possibility that EEES may make children envisage English as the sole language worth studying, but the assumptions on which both are based are quite different. HM6 is related to a concern from a cultural relativist perspective. It argues that early exposure to English language will inculcate into children the belief that only English is of a special value, a belief that is sharply contradicted with the fact that all languages and cultures are equal. HM7, on the other hand, is a kind of Japanese cultural nationalism. It argues that the over-emphasis of English language and Anglo-American culture leads children to disregard Japanese language and Japanese culture, which makes them lose their Japanese identity.

These two explanations illustrate that HM6 and HM7 are ostensibly similar but quite different in their view of language, that is, what language should be the first priority in education. Rather, they may even be totally opposed to each other in terms of cultural/language relativism. HM6 rejects the idea that a certain language is more valuable than others, whereas HM7 explicitly states that Japanese public education should give priority to learning Japanese language and culture over learning English and Anglo-American culture.

### **Counter-arguments against HM6/HM7**

Although the criticism of EEES fostering biased attitudes toward English is very abstract (indeed, no debater provides empirical evidence for this assertion), the counter-arguments are also highly abstract. One counter-argument is an optimistic view that asserts that such biased attitudes are avoidable if instruction is based on appropriate curriculum, materials, and teaching methods. Some proponents propose, for example, that a teacher should not plan an international education program as a study program of ALTs' own culture and home country (they are often from Australia, Canada, NZ, UK, or the US), that a teacher should not unreasonably prohibit Japanese language use in classrooms, and that a teacher should design an international education curriculum that includes the understanding of others, rather than superficial culture learning (called "three-Fs").

Although this counter-argument appears highly cogent, it should be questioned whether these pro-

posals alone can solve the problem. In fact, it is unclear whether such a biased attitude toward English can be overcome by instructional efforts in classrooms because a heavy emphasis on English language is not only a classroom phenomenon but is also deeply embedded in the social structure of Japanese society.

Some proponents make another counter-argument against the double-standard of HM6/HM7 and throw doubt on the implicit presumption that whereas a biased attitude toward English can be fostered in elementary schools, it does not matter in secondary or higher education. This counter-argument is plausible taking into consideration the fact that almost all junior high schools and the vast majority of senior high schools in Japan formally teach only English as a foreign language and higher education has placed the greatest emphasis on learning of English over other languages. There seems to be no difference in terms of vulnerability to the biased attitude between primary and secondary/higher education; thus, the counter-argument above is convincing. In order to effectively respond to the criticism, it is necessary to assert some “auxiliary theories” such as that secondary school students, unlike elementary school students, have developed a mental tolerance or immunity that prevents them from developing a biased attitude to English. This is a rather unrealistic claim, however, because there is no evidence in developmental science that such a mental or psychological tipping point is positioned around the age of 12-13.

In summary, as both the opponents and the proponents offer no theoretical or empirical basis for their arguments, they do not go beyond abstract and imagination-based discussion. In a nutshell, the proponents respond to their opponents’ naïve pessimism with naïve optimism. In order to make this “he-said-she-said” debate more productive, therefore, it is necessary to provide some sort of empirical data. It is true that a measurement of a biased attitude toward English is not fully developed, but some social psychological studies might offer some insights – indeed, there are many L2 attitude studies from a social psychological perspective, some of which have examined Japanese L2 attitudes (e.g., Rivers, 2011; Sullivan & Schatz, 2009). The actual debate, however, has been conducted without such empirical data, making the debate barren.

#### **5.4. HM8: On teachers’ burdens**

HM8 is concerned about the possibility that the introduction of EEES may explosively increase the tasks elementary school teachers must do, devastating teachers’ labor environment as well as teaching circumstances. One typical example is the urgent demand issued by All Japan Teachers and Staff Union on September 14, 2017. The union stated:

Many elementary school teachers do not have a license for English teaching, so they are unable to provide adequate instruction to children. Despite this situation, they are forced to bear an increased burden [of teaching English]. Even now, 33.5% of elementary school teachers are forced to work 80 hours or more a month of overtime, which exceeds the *karoshi*, or overwork death, line. Under these circumstances, [the introduction of English as a formal subject] will lead to even longer and busier working hours. Many municipalities are currently preparing for the preceding and scheduled implementation of the revised Course of Study. However, as the government does not develop any necessary condition, a member complains, “I feel resentful that everything is being left to us teachers.” (All Japan Teachers and Staff Union, 2017; my translation)

It should be noted that only a small proportion of people have criticized EEES on this ground (HM8) in the debate. Indeed, whereas both proponents and opponents have enthusiastically discussed a variety of influences on learners, they have neglected influences on teachers. In contrast to the heated debate on the possible benefits vs. harms for students, they less often refer to the impact of the introduction of EEES on teachers' educational and labor environments and their human rights. This relative indifference is quite dissimilar to the recent major educational debates (e.g., the debates on the revision of Basic Act on Education, history textbooks, and the national anthem and flag), which always addressed (negative and positive) impacts on teachers' status.

In recent years, however, this type of criticism seems to have increased. Since the late 2010s, the national and local governments, employers, and citizens have fully recognized the urgent need to promote “work style reform” (*hatarakikata kaikaku*), which has given much attention to the teachers' working environments. During the peak of the debate in the 2000s, however, this issue seemed to be often disregarded by anti-EEES debaters (among a few exceptions are some teachers' union groups such as New English Teachers' Association); hence, pro-EEES people also made little reference to it.

### 5.5 HM9/HM10: On children's burden

Some opponents argue that learning English is also a burden for elementary school children. It can be categorized into two types of criticism: HM9, the general criticism that learning English itself is a burden on children, and HM10, the criticism that English will be introduced as an entrance examination subject for private junior high schools, which will intensify the “examination war” among children.

As we already recognize the “relaxed” approach employed in PIS and Foreign Language Activities in the 2000s-2010s, the above criticism may seem like an overreaction, but it was a serious concern in the 1990s, when it was completely uncertain how EEES would be implemented. In fact, the governmental discussion in the Central Council for Education in 1995-96 repeatedly expressed wariness over this possibility (Terasawa, 2020). This concern, however, did not turn out to be a reality in the subsequent two decades. Most private junior high schools maintained the traditional four subjects for entrance examinations (i.e., Japanese language, math, science, and social studies), and English was only required for special entrance examinations (e.g., those for returnee students). For this reason, this issue was not seriously debated during the height of the debate in the 2000s.

It is unclear, however, how this situation will change in the 2020s. According to the Metropolitan Mock Test Center, a rapidly increasing number of private (and national) junior high schools have introduced English as an exam subject in their general entrance examinations since the late 2010s. The Center's blog article<sup>4)</sup> posted on Jan. 21, 2019 reports that the number has increased from 15 in 2014 to 125 in 2019. This situation is likely to accelerate from the 2020s onward, in which English is a formal subject that officially aims at promoting students' English proficiency and thus is required to evaluate their performance. In this situation, the junior high schools seem to have no reason to refrain from introducing English as an entrance exam subject.

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4) <https://www.syutoken-mosi.co.jp/blog/entry/entry001542.php>

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have analyzed arguments and provided an overall picture of the debate surrounding EEES. In particular, I have shown that although the debate is extremely complex and intertwined with a huge number of issues, it is not difficult to untangle them by focusing on the six types of proponents' arguments. Here, I will discuss two implications obtained through the examination.

First, only a few issues have been enthusiastically discussed. The four major points in dispute both by proponents and opponents are the following.

- Whether EEES is effective in fostering English proficiency (i.e., PR1 vs. NE5).
- Whether EEES promotes positive, rather than negative, attitudes toward learning English (PR3 vs. NE7).
- Whether the current insufficient educational conditions (e.g., a lack of teacher training, under-developed curriculum) have a negative impact on children's English language skills and learning (HM1/HM2 vs. proponents' counter arguments).
- Whether early exposure to English in EEES damages students' Japanese language skills (HM3/HM4 vs. proponents' counter arguments).

The heated debate on the four issues above has seemed to obscure other crucial issues. Some of these issues, despite their importance, are not necessarily seriously discussed and other issues that are concerned with mythical notions and based on questionable grounds have been left unchallenged, and neither scholars nor policymakers properly organized this debate. To avoid this messiness, therefore, it is necessary to construct frameworks that suppress one-sided arguments, allow proponents and opponents comprehensively to understand the whole picture of the debate, and enable them to analytically examine individual issues. These roles – organizing the debate and proposing a framework – should have been done by ELT scholars and applied linguists, who are relatively distant from administrative power (rather than MEXT committees members or public elementary schools teachers).

The second implication is that disagreements often stem from a lack of empirical data rather than an irreconcilable difference of values between proponents and opponents (rather, the value conflicts seem more serious within the proponents – for example, EEES for English skills development vs. EEES as international education). The issue of effectiveness, for example, seems to be easily solved at a formal level at least if one provides empirical evidence regarding whether EEES successfully promoted children's English skills.

Different arguments in the debate generally reflect the debater's different values and philosophy of language education, but many of these arguments are descriptive, and hence can be judged as true or false by a fact or empirical data. For example, if we obtain empirical evidence that perfectly demonstrates the effect of EEES on English language skills, even opponents that are skeptical about the effect will have no reason to oppose it and change their mind, and vice versa. The same is true for other issues on the negative effects on children's English pronunciation or Japanese language abilities, both of which can formally be solved by empirical research findings.

This suggests that the debate may be improved if ELT scholars and applied linguists conduct proper research and provide informative data. However, especially after the early 2010s, the research community did not take action to tackle the issue empirically; few research projects were launched to examine the positive or negative effects of EEES on the proposed outcomes. Therefore, it is difficult

to conclude that the debate significantly contributed to the subsequent development of academic research, theory, and discussions. This situation in the Japanese ELT community seems particularly unfortunate in comparison with other policy research communities, in which policy issues are intensively discussed based on empirical evidence produced by policy scientists, economists, sociologists, and other policy researchers.

In this paper, I organized the debate of EEES, identified its problems, and show the two broad implications for the future discussions. These implications both suggest that researchers should have much more substantial responsibilities in the debate than is generally thought. As pointed out in the last section, researchers should play a central role for creating productive discussion by organizing it properly and providing informative evidence.

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## Debate on English Language Education in Elementary Schools: Systematizing the Pros and Cons for Future Discussions

### ABSTRACT

The paper aims to systematically organize the debate surrounding English education in elementary schools (EEES) that has taken place since the late 1990s and to provide implications for future discussions. Through a qualitative content analysis of the literature, the following findings were obtained. (1) Pro-EEES arguments can be classified into six patterns that are mutually different in terms of premise (i.e., perception of social situation, effectiveness of EEES, and educational goals). (2) Anti-EEES arguments can be classified into two broad categories, namely, “EEES is ineffective” (categorized into 9 types) and “EEES is harmful” (categorized into 10 types). (3) Despite the numerous issues raised in the debate, only a few issues have been enthusiastically discussed. The other issues have received little attention, in spite of the fact that some of them are highly problematic. (4) The conflict between the proponents and opponents of EEES frequently stems from a lack of empirical data rather than an irreconcilable difference in values. This finding suggests that researchers can, and should, play a more central role than previously expected in studying EEES by providing empirical evidence and rendering the discussion productive.

**Key Words:** English language education in elementary schools, ELT in Japan, Qualitative content analysis