

# Japanese Primary Teachers' Awareness of Interactive Teaching in the English Classroom: An Initial Survey

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## Abstract

This paper is one part of a KAKENHI (grand-in-aid research) study of English language classroom discourse at the primary and secondary levels of education in Japan. Following a survey of junior and senior high school teachers' awareness of interactive teaching (Hosokawa, 2016), this article reports the findings of a survey of Japanese primary teachers' awareness of interactive teaching in English. The total sample involved 44 teachers. The data obtained provides insight into teachers' backgrounds, teaching methodology, classroom activities, and actions adopted to implement interactive teaching in English language learning at the primary level. The study reveals a number of problems and challenges confronting primary English as schools seek to introduce interactive teaching. Additionally, the study also indicates the need and a direction for future research into the discourse of the primary English classroom.

*Keywords:* primary English, interaction, teachers' awareness

## Introduction

Reflecting rapid globalization and the spread of English, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) introduced a course called 'foreign language activities' into the primary school curriculum in 2011. Widely interpreted to mean English, the course is compulsory for all fifth and sixth grade elementary pupils. The overall objective of the course is: "To form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of languages and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages" (MEXT, 2010, p.1). This stated goal indicates a focus not primarily on the development of English language abilities. Rather, the focus is more general, the fostering of a positive attitude to language learning, the development of intercultural understanding, and a fostering of general communication abilities. Accordingly,

the guidelines suggest that lessons focus on experiencing the joy of communication through speaking and listening, and the introduction of basic expressions by means of activity-based learning. The acquisition of a core curriculum of words and phrases is not aimed at. Additionally, reading and writing are not encouraged, being perceived as an extra burden at the elementary level.

In 2013 MEXT announced a further significant change to the elementary school curriculum. From 2020 English activity-based lessons will be introduced from the third grade once a week and formal English instruction twice a week from the fifth grade. This implies a change of focus away from a general aim of the development of the foundation of communication abilities to a specific focus on English communication abilities. Primary teachers will be required to teach English as a formal subject, even though most have no previous experience of doing so. In addition, as emphasis is to be placed on the development of communicative English abilities, it is implied that the classroom experience will be a different one from that common in Japanese junior and senior high schools with its focus on the memorization of abstract knowledge, vocabulary, and the analysis of grammatical structures. Consequently, if the reforms are to achieve their stated aim, there is a need for classroom teachers to develop understanding of how English communication abilities might be developed through the adoption of appropriate classroom practice in a Japanese elementary school context. However, to date little research on primary teachers' understanding of communicative teaching has been carried out. Accordingly, this study attempts a survey of primary teachers' awareness of interactive teaching. It is hoped that results obtained may, firstly, provide an overview of Japanese primary teachers' awareness of interactive English language teaching and, secondly, provide insight into how classroom practice might be enhanced in order to achieve MEXT's stated aim of developing communicative abilities in English.

## Primary English Context in Japan

The sociolinguistic environment of Japan is not one that naturally encourages children to learn English or develop an interest in the language. Japan is an island nation and offers little exposure to English during daily life. There are relatively few opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Accordingly, it should not be surprising if most pupils, and indeed many parents, do not fully perceive the importance of English in the modern world and place greater importance on other aspects of the primary curriculum.

In addition to the Japanese sociolinguistic environment, a number of

educational factors can also be identified as unfavourable to the learning of English and in particular the development of communicative abilities. Firstly, at the primary level, there is a lack of trained teachers who are themselves proficient in English. MEXT (2010) guidelines, in preparation for the introduction of Foreign Language Activities, suggested that, in principle, English activities should be taught by classroom teachers, that is, ordinary primary teachers responsible for the whole range of subjects taught to one class during the school day. However, many primary teachers arguably have insufficient English skills to teach English and, in particular, lack oral communication skills. Certainly this appears to be the view of many of the teachers themselves. Hamamoto (2012) notes that Japanese elementary school teachers feel their own English proficiency is “the head cause of concern” (p. 6) if English is to be introduced at the primary level. Earlier studies by Butler confirm this apprehension. Butler (2004) reports that Japanese elementary school teachers perceive their level of English abilities to be lower than the ideal level for teaching English. Butler (2007) also revealed that 60% of Japanese elementary school teachers felt that teachers with a native-level of English proficiency should teach English classes. Undoubtedly, a lack of proficiency is likely to be problematic given the strong emphasis placed on speaking and listening skills in the MEXT (2013) guidelines for the curriculum changes to be introduced in 2020.

In addition to the above, most elementary school teachers can be expected to have received little or no formal training in how to teach English. Currently employed teachers did not have to take any academic coursework related to the teaching of English during pre-service training. Moreover, in-service training has been limited with MEXT devolving responsibility to local boards of education. Invariably, there has been little uniformity of provision and that made available has been of limited duration. Inadequate or insufficient training is particularly worrying given the widely accepted view that the availability of trained teachers and teacher training is a crucial factor in the successful implementation of English programmes (Kikpatrick, 2010). Unsurprisingly, as Machida (2015) reveals, due to the lack of formal training, English proficiency level and teaching experience, Japanese elementary teachers feel a high level of anxiety in teaching English activities.

Of further concern are the absence of a clearly defined curriculum and a lack of coordination. The primary curriculum aims at teaching Foreign Language Activities (English) not as a subject but as a subject area with no specific emphasis on building children’s basic knowledge of English or English abilities. Consequently, the curriculum lacks a clearly defined focus and specific learning

outcomes. Additionally, if local budgets are sufficient, Japanese English Teachers (JETs) or Assistant English Teachers (ALTs) may be hired. If the money is not available, then the classroom teacher is likely to be the sole teacher of English. Compounding this situation, there is little coordination / cooperation between primary schools and junior high schools to create an effective transition, little prospect of junior high schools building upon the learning that has already occurred in the elementary classroom.

The commitment of MEXT to English language education, and consequently that of local education authorities and school management, might also be questioned. Current instruction in Foreign language Activities is limited to 35 hours per year for each year group. The reforms to be introduced in 2020 initially envisaged that Year 3 and 4 would receive one or two 45 minutes classes and Year 5 and 6 pupils three 45 minute classes of English a week. This has since been reduced to one for Year 3 and 4 and two 45-minute class for Year 5 and 6 pupils. Given this apparent downplaying of the importance of English, together with the financial constraints on schools and local authorities, it is not surprising that in-service teacher training has not received the attention that might be expected to accompany a major change in the national curriculum.

## Interactive Teaching to Develop Communication Abilities

### Shift to interaction

In recent SLA literature the focus has gradually shifted from linguistic input, output and information processing in the learner mind to investigations of social interaction and collaborative learning in classrooms. This shift reflects a view that an input and output perspective of language acquisition is insufficient to provide an understanding of the complex nature of communication and is inappropriate as a model of communication.

The shift to a social interaction perspective draws upon sociocultural theory based on the work of Vygotsky. In understanding the development of human mental functioning, sociocultural theory gives emphasis to sociocultural and contextual factors and the importance of individual agency. Additionally, it is assumed that language plays an important role in human development. Accordingly, sociocultural theory posits that human beings internalize language during the processes of social and cultural interaction.

The shift to an interaction view of language learning is also grounded in dialogism represented by Bakhtin (1981). Dialogism suggests that an individual does not exist outside of a chain of dialogue. What is said inevitably reflects the

meaning created in previous dialogue with others. In other words, existence of others is of significant importance and individual speech is deeply related to the speech of others. Although imitation and mimicry are part of learning, the learner also appropriates new sounds and meanings and then uses them with his or her own voice (van Lier, 2004).

Turning to SLA, Swain (2005) proposed the concept of 'linguaging' to replace output, emphasizing dialogic processes of learning. This is in contrast to an information transmission model of SLA that assumes input is fed into the brain through interaction, cognitive processes then happen inside the brain, with communication and interaction through language emerging as the result of cognitive processes. Swain and Deter instead argue that 'linguaging' is the actual process through which growth occurs by using language, for instance, through speaking and writing. Through linguaging learners are enabled to "mediate cognitively complex activities" (2007, p. 822). In other words, language use such as speaking and writing is a tool to help develop an individual's thinking and language ability.

### Arrangement and interaction

The concept of guided participation (Rogoff, 1990) provides sociocultural understanding of the processes by which learners are assisted to become members of their community through interactive teaching. According to Rogoff, learning processes occur through arrangements and interactions. The arrangement of children's experiences through the choice and structuring of activities that learners participate in is viewed to have a significant influence on cognitive development, as it sets constraints on the actual interaction between children and the adult/teacher. Rogoff (1990) further suggests that verbal interaction, as well as emotional and nonverbal communication, provides structure for children's understanding and bridges what children know and what children have to learn. In interaction, assistance provided by the expert (adult) should be adjusted to the level of the learner and gradually a handover of responsibility for an activity should occur.

Rogoff also suggests that the learner's active involvement is indispensable for active communication and learning. Learner agency is the key element to promote active involvement of the learner. Learners should be encouraged and allowed to self-initiate actions, express their voice and determine their own actions. This echoes with Bakhtin's dialogism in which the learner is understood to appropriate new meanings and make them his or her own (Bakhtin, 1981) and with linguaging in which learning is perceived not as 'output practice' but as 'thought in action'

(Swain, 2005). Thus activities eliciting merely productive and receptive use of language commanded by the teacher are not sufficient for successful language learning to take place. Instead, it is required that language-learning activities employed in the EFL classroom, should seek to encourage active learner agency - independent language use reflecting the students' own motivations and interests.

## Research Goal

SLA literature reveals the importance of interaction in the formation of pupil understanding and the development of language. In seeking to foster such interaction the choice of tasks by the teacher is a critical element. It is teachers who are directly responsible for the actual provision of educational experience. Recognizing both the importance of interaction and the responsibility of the teacher for the classroom experience, this study accordingly seeks to investigate teacher awareness of interactive teaching and how such teaching is beneficial to the enhancement of communication abilities.

## Participants

The study is part of a larger scale study that examines the role of classroom discourse in English education from primary to secondary levels in Japan. The survey was conducted in September and October 2015. Questionnaires were sent out to 100 schools in a prefecture in the southern Japan. As the aim of the study was to obtain a comprehensive overview of primary teachers' awareness of interactive teaching, 91 local government schools were chosen randomly from different parts of the prefecture to achieve diversity. The questionnaire was also sent out to all the 6 private schools and 3 national schools in the prefecture on the assumption that a different picture might emerge as these schools have a greater focus on English education. A total of 500 answer sheets were sent out, 5 answer sheets per school. A total of 44 teachers responded to the survey. The author acknowledges that the size of the sample data is small but that it is sufficient to provide insight useful to an understanding of primary teachers' awareness of and concerns related to interactive English language teaching.

## Instrument

The instrument used in this investigation was a questionnaire based on a study by Hosokawa (2016) of junior high and senior high school teachers. The

current study aimed to explore awareness of interactive teaching among primary teachers involved in teaching English activities, with particular focus given to (1) how participating teachers perceived interactive teaching and (2) how they conduct interactive teaching. The questionnaire included the following 7 domains:

1. Participants' general background information
2. Participants' training background in interactive teaching
3. Methodologies employed in class
4. Activities employed in class
5. Expected effects of interactive lessons
6. Teacher actions / strategies for interactive teaching
7. Pupils' responses to interactive teaching.

The purpose of domains 1 and 2 was to obtain general background information about the teachers. Domains 5 and 7 were designed to illuminate teachers' awareness of and value attached to interactive teaching. Domains 3, 4 and 6 were designed to investigate the actual practice of interactive teaching. Drawing on Rogoff (1995), the questions in domains 3 and 4 seek to identify the distal arrangement of lessons, and the questions in domain 6 to identify interactive features in lessons (See Appendix 1).

## Results

### Domain 1: Participants' profile

The vast majority of the teachers that replied to the survey are teachers in local government primary schools (93.2 %). Only 6.8% teach in national and private schools. A majority, some 86.6 % teach compulsory Foreign Language Activities (English) to Year 5 (38.6 %) and Year 6 (49 %) pupils. A smaller percentage (13.4 %) teach English to Year 4 or younger pupils. As perhaps is to be expected at the primary level, female teachers (54.4 %) outnumber male teachers (45.5 %). Years of teaching experience spread across the scale from teachers new to the classroom to those with many years of experience of primary education. The largest group comprised of teachers with over 20 years experience (40.9 %) of general primary education.

With regard to the teaching of English (Foreign Language Activities) a clear majority (63 %) have 0-4 years of experience, indicating that they started teaching English activities after the new curriculum came into effect in 2011. However, 36 % have experience of teaching English that predates the introduction of compulsory Foreign Language Activities. A majority (72 %) are normal classroom teachers who teach the broad spectrum of the primary curriculum. Specialist

English teachers comprise only 2.3 % of respondents. Self-assessed English abilities suggest that the majority consider themselves beginner-level users of English. A total of 47.7 % ticked the lowest level (capable of greeting) on the self-assessment scale and 31.8 % the second lowest level (capable of shopping and ordering at the restaurant), a combined total of 79.5% (See Figure 1-7 in Appendix 2).

## Domain 2: Training background in interactive teaching

The survey results reveal that, during pre-service teacher training, most teachers did not receive any instruction in respect of either a theoretical understanding of (75 %) or practical skills related to (79.5%) interactive teaching. This is not surprising as academic coursework concerned with the teaching of English was not required when the majority of respondents were in pre-service teacher training programmes at university. English was not then on the primary school curriculum. However, a majority (59.1%) indicate that they have subsequently received instruction in the theory underlying interactive teaching as well as practical training (54.5 %) during in-service training. A large majority (90.9%) also indicate a willingness to take part in practical training and to exchange ideas with other teachers on practical teaching skills (88.6 %) (See Figure 8-13 in Appendix 2).

## Domain 3: Teaching methodology currently employed in the classroom

On the use of English in the classroom (Appendix 1, Questionnaire, Domain 3), less than half of the teachers can be said to have given a positive response. Only 42 % clearly indicate that they teach lessons in English (31.8 % Scale 4: agree; 9% Scale 5: strongly agree). In contrast, 58 % give a neutral or negative response (34.1 % Scale 3: neutral, 20.5 % Scale 2: disagree, 4.5 % Scale 1: strongly disagree). With regard to the use of team-teaching - usually a Japanese classroom teacher teaching alongside a native-speaker assistant language teacher (ALT) - 61.4% indicated positive participation in team-teaching activities (34.1 % Scale 5: strongly agree; 27.3 % Scale 4: agree). The widespread use of ALTs in team teaching indicated here is a response to the suggestion by MEXT that pupils general communication abilities, intercultural understanding and attitude to language learning might be improved by “inviting [into the classroom] native speakers of the foreign language or (by) seeking cooperation from local people” (MEXT, 2010, p.2). However, a sizeable number of respondents (38.4 % chose Scales, 3, 2 and 1) either had not participated in team-teaching or appear to have had an unsatisfactory experience of team-teaching.



With regard to the adoption of activity-based teaching (Appendix 1, Question 16) 60.4 % (Scale 4, 36.4 %; Scale 5, 22.%) of the teachers responded positively. However, as with team-teaching, a sizeable number gave a negative response (39.8% chose Scales, 3, 2 and 1), reflecting either a failure to adopt activity-based teaching or an unsatisfactory experience of its use. Adoption by a majority of respondents in all probability reflects MEXT's (2010) advocacy of activity-based teaching.

While the above questions elicit generally positive responses from a majority of the teachers, the result is less positive for questions 17 and 18. Question 17 is concerned with the adoption of interactive teaching. Here, while 47.8% appear to indicate a positive experience of interactive teaching (Scale 5, 2.3%; Scale 4, 45.5 %), a large number of the teachers appear to be ambivalent (43.2 % choosing Scale 3). This division might, on the one hand, reflect a failure to adopt interactive teaching, a greater level of comfort with more traditional methods of instruction coupled with the everyday pressures faced by all teachers. It is easier to continue doing what you have traditionally done than change course. On the other hand, it might reflect something more fundamental, a failure to fully comprehend the nature of interactive teaching and hence uncertainty about how it might be implemented in the classroom. This latter explanation in part also helps to explain the result of Question 18. Here the respondents clearly indicate they are uncertain about and are struggling to find an appropriate methodology to adopt in the classroom. A total of 66 % clearly expressed uncertainty (Scale 4, 50 %; Scale 5 15.9 %) (See Figure 14, Appendix 2). Such uncertainty is unlikely to benefit the introduction of interactive teaching and the development of communication skills.

#### Domain 4: Activities employed in the classroom

The literature review suggests that distal arrangement of children's experiences through the choice and structuring of activities has a significant influence on resulting interaction and cognitive development (Rogoff, 1990). Accordingly, this section consists of questions on types of activities teachers employ in the classroom (See Figure 15 in Appendix 2).

The activities in questions 19 to 24 are generally considered meaningful and motivating for young learners. The results reveal that games (Question 19) were very popular (Scale 4, 47.7%, often employed; Scale 5, 43.2 %, employed every time). Quizzes (Question 20) were another activity frequently used by teachers (Scale 4, 52.3 %, often employed; Scale 3, 27.3 %, sometimes employed). Chants and songs (Question 21) were also very popular activities among teachers (Scale 4, 27.3%, often; Scale 5, 45.5 %, every time). The results reflect the fact that "Hi,

friends,” the teaching material assigned/designated by MEXT, contains all of these types activities and the materials are widely used by the teachers rather than self-selecting materials.

In contrast to the above, story-based activities and cross-curricular activities are much less popular than games, quizzes and chants. For story-based activities (Question 22), only 9.1 % chose Scale 4 (often) and 0 % chose Scale 5 (every time). Conversely, 31.8 % chose Scale 2 (rarely) and 22.7 % chose Scale 1 (never) and, although 36.4 % of the teachers chose Scale 3 (sometimes), this is perhaps not a positive choice of activity on the part of the teachers. Rather, it is likely attributable to the fact that “Hi, friends 2”, the material used in Year 6, contains a unit utilizing a Japanese fairy tale. For cross-curricular activities (Question 23), 36.4 % of respondents chose Scale 3 (sometimes), 38.6 % chose Scale 2 (rarely) and 11 % chose Scale 1(never). This response is understandable as it is generally considered demanding to conduct cross-curricular teaching that requires skills to combine subject content and appropriate language items. Craft activities (Question 24) are also not as popular as games, quizzes and chants. 45.5 % chose Scale 3 (sometimes), 29.5% chose Scale 2 (rarely) and 5% chose Scale 1 (never). In seeking to understand the less enthusiastic use of activities in questions 22-24 detailed here, there is perhaps a reasonable explanation and “sometimes”, Scale 3, may be a satisfactory answer. Not all activities can be used all the time. Indeed, not all activities can be used frequently. Rather, a judicious mix appropriate to curricular aims, one promoting of pupil motivation and learning, is a desirable aim. One way in which diversity of activities might most easily be fostered is to build a greater variety of such activities into the assigned materials, “Hi friends 1” and “Hi friends 2”. Nevertheless, it is probably also the case that teachers (and materials writers) lack awareness of how story-based and craft based activities can be utilised in the L2 classroom to develop communication skills, learner agency and autonomous language use.

The activities listed in questions 25 to 27 are generally categorized as traditional language-focused activities. The survey result shows that these activities were popular among teachers. Although responses were divided, rote-memorization of phrases and words (Question 25) was widely used by teachers. The most popular activity (Question 26) was children repeating after the teacher (Scale 4, 65.9 %; Scale 5, 25 %). Dialogues (Question 27) were popular (Scale 4, 56.8 %; Scale 5, 15.9 %). Activities making use of CDs and tapes (Question 28), TV and DVDs (Question 29), and computer-assisted activities (Question 30) were also viewed favourably. The popularity of these activities may in part be due to teachers’ lack confidence in their own English and the fact that teaching materials

making use of these educational technologies are available, provided by the government. The least popular activity was grammar teaching (Question 31), never used (43.2 %) and rarely used (43.2 %) by respondents. Lastly, reading and writing activities (Question 32) were also used infrequently with 47 % of teachers answering 'rarely' and 22.7 % 'never'.

#### Domain 5: Expected effects of interactive teaching

The survey results indicate that teachers in general expect interactive teaching to have a broad positive effective on pupils (See Figure 16, Appendix 2) with positive responses (Scales 4 and 5 combined) of nearly 70 % and above obtained for most of the questions 33-38. Most notable is the response to Question 38, expectations of a greater willingness to communicate, the development of a positive attitude to communication (79.6 % combining Scales 4 and 5). In other categories significantly high expectations were also observed: (Question 33) getting accustomed to basic English expressions (72. 8%); (Question 34) development of listening abilities (70.5 %); (Question 35) development of pronunciation and English rhythm (68.2 %); (Question 36) perception of English as a communication tool (70.5%). A somewhat lower response was obtained for Question 37 that relates to teachers' expectations of deepening intercultural understanding. Although this question received a positive response (59.4 %), this was lower than the 70% + answers to the other questions in Domain 5.

#### Domain 6: Teacher actions/strategies for interactive teaching

Questions 39 to 49 in this section are concerned with teacher actions taken to implement interactive teaching in their classrooms, the aim being to obtain a glimpse of actual classroom practice (See Figure 17, Appendix 2). Firstly, survey responses (Question 39) indicate that 69. 9 % (Scale 4, 36.4 %; Scale 5, 29.5 %) of the teachers make active use of Classroom English, which is of a formulaic nature. However, when it comes to the use of English other than Classroom English (Question 40), the percentage of positive responses drops to 47.8% (Scale 4, 36.4 %; Scale 5, 11.4%).

Positive responses are also lower on the two questions related to communicative language use. In Question 41, concerned with whether teachers seek to make use of meaningful contexts to introduce target words and phrases, 45.5% (Scale 4, 34.1 %; Scale 5, 11.4 %) responded positively. Similarly, in Question 42, concerned with whether teachers get pupils to use target phrases and words in meaningful communication, 40. 9 % (Scale 4, 27.3%; Scale 5,13.6 %) answered positively.

The response to Question 43, whether teachers try to provide pupils with as many opportunities for language use as possible, was extremely positive with 88.7% (Scale 4, 61.4 %; Scale 5, 27.3 %) stating that they did so. Such a high percentage, if accurate, implies that teachers do not dominate discourse and responsibility for on going activities is frequently handed over to pupils. Question 44 asked whether teachers seek to create an atmosphere that promotes active interaction. This question also received a positive response of 68.2 % (Scale 4, 59.1%; Scale 5, 9.1 %). Teachers also replied positively, 79.6% (Scale 4, 59.1%; Scale 5, 20.5 %), to Question 45 concerned with whether teachers make use of questions and clues to provide assistance to pupils experiencing difficulty. However, here there would appear to be some conflict between the response above to Question 45, and that given to Question 46, whether teachers improvise questions and hints according to pupils' responses. When it comes to such improvisation, the percentage falls to 61.4 % (Scale 4, 40.9%; Scale 5, 20.5 %) and implying that the provision of contingent assistance is insufficiently used. This may be due to a number of reasons. Teachers may rely more of traditional methods of assistance - explain and tell. Teachers may be unaware of the utility of contingent assistance. Perhaps teachers feel they have insufficient time in a busy schedule to make greater use of contingent assistance. It may even be that some teachers find providing contingent assistance a difficult skill to master. The responses to Question 48, concerned with the use of pair and group work to prompt interaction reveal these to be widely used with a 68.2% (Scale 4, 47.7 %; Scale 5, 20.5 %) positive response. However, the responses to Question 49, the choice of interesting and meaningful activities to encourage active language use, were less positive (53.2 % positive response, Scale 4, 38.6 %; Scale 5, 13.6 %). One explanation here may be an insufficient understanding of the nature and needs of interactive teaching and hence a difficulty in selecting and adapting appropriate materials. It is however, also likely, that overworked teachers find it easier to make use of MEXT designated and provided materials rather than seek to supplement these themselves.

#### Domain 7: Effect of interactive teaching on pupils.

The last domain relates to teachers' perceptions of pupils' responses to interactive teaching in English (See Figure 18). Here the response was mixed. Question 50, whether teachers think that pupils understand Classroom English, received a positive 54.5% (Scale 4, 38.6%; Scale 5, 15.9%) response. However, although positive, this implies teachers feel a large percentage of their pupils (45.5%) fail to comprehend adequately. Such a large 'failure' rate is clearly

unacceptable. Alternatively, it may be that teachers' perceptions are wrong or that teachers feel more comfortable, as previously noted, with a tell and explain in Japanese methodology, the certainty of instruction rather than allowing pupils to develop their own understanding through the interactive process. A positive response 61.4% (Scale 4, 50%; Scale 5, 11.4%) was also given to Question 51, whether pupils show a developing interest in English interaction. Once again, however, worryingly 38.6% were neutral or negative in their response to this key feature of the reforms.

Of equal concern are the responses to questions 52-55 related to comprehension, productive language use and motivation. Only 29.5% (Scale 4, 25%; Scale 5, 4.5%) responded positively to Question 52, whether teachers perceive any notable effect on pupils' understanding of questions and explanations in English. Question 53, whether students sought to respond to questions in English, received a low 40.9% (Scale 4, 34.1%; Scale 5, 6.8%) positive rating and Question 54, whether pupils try to initiate utterances in English, only received a total of 34.1 % positive responses. A number of explanations might be found here, not least of which is that these are young learners, struggling not only with a new language but also a methodology and expectations possibly perceived as at variance with accepted practice in their other subject areas. For the teachers too, both the teaching of English and the use of interactive communicative activities may be unfamiliar and require a different kind of classroom practice to that with which they are accustomed and feel comfortable. Lastly, with regard to increased motivation to learn English (Question 55) only 45.4 % (Scale 4, 40.9%; Scale 5, 4.5%) gave a positive response. If an accurate reflection of student attitudes, this should be regarded as particularly worrying as motivation is undoubtedly a key factor in successful language acquisition.

## Discussion and Research Implications

### A need for language skills and teacher training

In 2020, with the introduction of the new curriculum, among the challenges teachers will face is the question of how best to achieve the key objective of raising pupils' basic English communication abilities rather than merely enhancing the foundation of communication abilities. Two key issues here are, firstly, teachers' own communication skills in English and, secondly, teachers' ability to choose and use appropriate teaching methodologies. The increasing attention given to interaction in recent SLA literature emphasizes the importance of active language use, the importance of a dynamic and communication oriented learning

environment. In order to achieve this it is essential that teachers have a sufficient command of the language to conduct interactive lessons in English. In addition, under the new guidelines, literacy skills will be incorporated in the new curriculum for Years 5 and 6. Consequently, as well as oral English skills, teachers will be required to possess reading and writing skills. A further need for teachers to themselves have a high level of proficiency in English is a commitment to the continued use of team teaching after 2020. For efficient and effective team teaching to occur, it is essential that classroom teachers and ALTs are able to communicate well together, to plan and coordinate their joint lessons, to have a similar understanding of the aims and objectives of courses, materials, and methodologies. The English language ability of teachers does then emerge as a key issue, one essential to the success of the 2020 curricular reforms. If the reforms are to be a success, it appears incumbent upon those responsible for the introduction of the new curriculum, together with those responsible for the administration of the primary English, to give greater attention to and make arrangements for the raising of teachers' own levels of English language proficiency.

In addition to raising the level of language ability of many elementary school teachers, the survey results also imply an urgent need for training in English language teaching skills appropriate to the communicative aims of the new curriculum. Indeed, the provision of such training appears to be an essential requirement if, as Kirkpatrick (2010) points out, the availability of trained teachers and appropriate teacher training is indispensable to the successful implementation of English language initiatives. The data on teachers' backgrounds indicates a lack of, or insufficient provision of, in-service and pre-service training in practical language teaching skills. Respondents were aware the importance of interactive teaching and expressed a strong wish to take part in practical training. Furthermore, although activity-based teaching and team-teaching are widely used in schools today, a majority of respondents expressed uncertainty about their choice of an appropriate methodology, stating that they struggle to find one. The implication here is that further in-service training is needed if teachers are to be well informed, equipped with appropriate teaching skills, and are fully able to make decisions concerning methodology and choice of activities. The provision of such training, the raising of teacher awareness and skill levels is vital. As Rogoff (1990) points out, effective and meaningful pedagogy are a result of educational arrangements, processes and interaction, themselves arising from distal arrangements including curriculum, lesson planning, and task design.

## Types of classroom discourse

Nearly half of respondents claimed that they teach lessons in English. Considering the levels of self-assessed English proficiency, this is an unexpected result. It is then reasonable to question to what extent teachers actually use English in class. It is possible that there might be a gap between what teachers claim and what actually happens. A further question that occurs concerns what type of English teachers actually use in class. According to the survey results, half of the teachers answered that their use of English is not limited to Classroom English. However, the low levels of self-assessed language skills and low levels of confidence, it seems appropriate to assume that the use of non-Classroom English is limited and that lessons are conducted in simple English. As recently explored by a number of researchers, it is important to identify what type and level of English primary teachers use and is needed to teach English. This survey echoes this research and calls for further investigation of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of English language use by primary classroom teachers.

The results of the survey reveal a number of areas of ambiguity. One such ambiguity relates to the fact that less than half of respondents (47.8%) expressed a positive experience of interactive teaching. At first glance this appears disappointing. However, it is also possible to view this finding in a different light. A large number of teachers expressed doubt about the adequacy of their own levels of English language proficiency. In addition, the survey revealed a lack of or limited in-service training and the desire of teachers for such instruction. Given these facts, then perhaps 47.8% is actually a positive result than can be built upon. By way of explanation, it is possible to assume that primary teachers are by nature more dialogic and may, in general, have communication skills more suited to their pupils than is the case with secondary English teachers.

A second area of ambiguity relates to the popularity expressed by teachers for the use of meaningful and motivating activities such as games, quizzes and chants. However, in apparent contradiction is the expressed popularity and widespread use of rote memorization and dialogue practice. Such exercises normally imply traditional discourse patterns and formal methods of instruction. One explanation for this seeming ambiguity is the widespread adoption of teaching materials supplied by the MEXT that include numerous games, chants and quizzes. That is, these types of activity are not in widespread use because they have deliberately been chosen by the teachers as a result of reflection on the needs of interactive language teaching. Rather, they are in use because they are incorporated into the materials teachers have been provided with.

A third area of ambiguity relates to the positive response given by teachers

concerning giving pupils opportunities for language use (Question 43, 88.7%). In seeming contradiction, teachers were not confident about either the provision of opportunities for language use in meaningful contexts, or being able to select activities meaningful and relevant to pupils. Once again, one possible explanation for this dichotomy lies in teachers' awareness, or lack of awareness, of theories behind communicative and interactive language teaching resulting in uncertainty regarding the selection and use of communicative activities. English is not a subject many have taught before, teachers feel their own language skills are inadequate, and many can be expected to have a limited awareness of interactive language teaching, an approach to teaching different from their own experience of learning English and probably their own current teaching methodology. The implication is a need for further investigation to obtain a more detailed analysis of classroom discourse and further illumination of teachers' accounts.

As the study reveals, teachers' responses appear to be contradictory and inconsistent, notably so when compared with what might be expected of teachers in secondary and adult second language learning environments. As already indicated, this might result from a lack of understanding of communicative and interactive language teaching. Additionally, it may also be the case that good primary practice is of a different nature from that of secondary and adult classrooms (Ohashi, 2015). Kwon and Kellogg (2005) suggest that good primary practice may require a different type of discourse from secondary English in order to construct the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and argue that primary discourse appears to be "syntagmatic" (2005, p. 336) rather than "paradigmatic" (Cameron, 2001, p.51). Whereas paradigmatic discourse is concerned with formal abstract concepts and logical argument with predictable language use, something more obvious in formal education at the secondary level, syntagmatic discourse implies that the content of interaction is unpredictable or unspecified, is co-constructed, and involves reversible roles on the part of teacher and pupils. That is, it is more like "a friendly conversation, creating or representing a feeling of group identity and collaboration" (Cook cited in Kwon & Kellogg, 2005, p.339). In this sense, even with through the use of simple English, it may be feasible at the primary level to engage in interaction that prompts pupils' participation and appropriation of language. In their study Kwon & Kellogg report that primary teachers do engage in such discourse and are less concerned with activity completion, pacing, formal instruction and syllabus completion.

An important element in the prompting of learning in primary discourse is contingency and unpredictability. As Hoey (1991, p.68) suggests, memorizing ritualistic conversational expressions (frozen pairs) of language is initially



expected in primary English. In fact a lot of classroom practice in the early primary English classroom is spent learning vocabulary and frozen pairs. Perhaps the popularity of rote-memorization and dialogue practice exhibited in this study reflects this. However, as Kwon and Kellogg (2005) suggest, unpredictability is an inherent characteristic of real discourse. Swain (1995; 2000) also argues that unpredictability is a characteristic feature of Vygotsky's ZPD. Ohashi (2017), in a study of primary English at a private school in Japan, reveals that more active participation and richer creative language use emerge in contingent open classroom discourse than in a classroom with a rigid and predictable discourse. This it is suggested results from a handover of responsibility for on going activity, pupils encouraged to initiate utterances and express voices in contingent open discourse. In addition to this handover of responsibility, the level of language used would also appear to be critical. A tentative assumption by Kwon and Kellogg (2005) is that primary English requires simpler "input" rather than "high quality input", input that enables the learner to appropriate language immediately and as a consequence participate in friendly easy-going exchanges of dialogue and express their voices, such that improvisation and unpredictable language use and actions emerge. With the emphasis given to communication and active language use in MEXT guidelines, further research into classroom discourse in the Japanese primary English classroom appears called for, most notably in the areas of levels of language use, contingency, task design, and sociocultural goals and activities.

## Conclusion

The current study aimed to illuminate primary teachers' awareness of interactive teaching in the English classroom through a survey consisting of 55 inventories in 7 domains. Although the size of sample data obtained is small, the study does provide beneficial insight as well as implications for future research. The shortage of both pre-service and in-service training to address teaching skills and levels of English proficiency emerged as major concerns, suggesting an urgent need for the provision of appropriate training. The raising of teachers' levels of English proficiency is of prime importance. Additionally, there is a need for teachers to develop a good understanding of approaches, methodology and activities appropriate for a communicative and interactive classroom-learning environment. The development of such an understanding can be expected to have a significant influence on types and quality of classroom interaction and on teaching /learning processes.

As noted, another interesting finding are the apparent contradictions and

ambivalence expressed by respondents in their awareness of interactive teaching. For example, despite limited English proficiency, teachers state that lessons are conducted in English. It is claimed that interactive teaching methodology is adopted with frequent use made of meaningful activities. However, traditional language-focused activities are also widely employed. These apparent contradictions briefly noted here and evident in other instances could be interpreted as a reflection of an insufficient understanding by teachers' of the nature of interactive and communicative teaching. What does emerge without ambiguity is the need for further clarification if teachers are to be assisted to provide their pupils with a classroom experience of quality, one that meets the objectives set down by MEXT and also supports all learners to achieve to the best of their abilities.

Finally, there appears to be a clear need to improve our understanding of the primary classroom and primary discourse. This is all the more pressing if ordinary classroom teachers, that is, teachers who are not language specialists, are to continue to have the main responsibility for teaching primary English in Japan. Research indicating that primary discourse is of different nature to that encountered at secondary and adults levels of learning also calls for a need to deepen our awareness of the primary classroom, a need to develop our knowledge of the characteristics of a good practice that will lead to achievement of MEXT's primary objective, the development of basic communication skills.

## Acknowledgement

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## Appendix 1: Translated questionnaire

### Domain 1: Participants' profile

- |                               |                                    |   |                |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|----------------|
| 1. Main affiliation           | 1. National                        | 2. Local government                                   | 3. Private     |
| 2. Year group to teach        | 1. Year 4 & under                  | 2. Year 5   | 3. Year 6      |
| 3. Gender                     | 1. Male                            | 2. Female   |                |
| 4. Primary experience         | 1. 0-4 years                       | 2. 5-9 years  | 3. 10-14 years |
|                               | 4. 15-19 years                     | 5. 20+  |                |
| 5. Primary English experience | 1. 0-4 years                       | 2. 5-9 years  | 3. 10 +        |
| 6. Position                   | 1. Classroom teacher               | 2. English specialist                                 | 3. Others      |
| 7. English proficiency        | 1. Capable of greeting             | 2. Capable of shopping and ordering at the restaurant |                |
|                               | 3. Capable of general conversation | 4. Capable of discussion on specific topics           |                |
|                               | 5. Near-native                     |   |                |

### Domain 2: Training background in interactive teaching

- |   |        |       |
|---|--------|-------|
| 8. Attended courses on theories in pre-service training   | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| 9. Attended practical training in pre-service training    | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| 10. Attended courses on theories in-service training      | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| 11. Attended practical training in in-service training    | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| 12. Wish to take practical training                       | 1. Yes | 2. No |
| 13. Wish to exchange practical ideals with other teachers | 1. Yes | 2. No |

### Domain 3: Methodology currently used

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |                   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|-------------------|
|  | 1 | • | 2 | • | 3 | • | 4 | • | 5 | Strongly disagree |
| 14. Teach English in English                               |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 15. Employ team-teaching                                   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 16. Employ activity-based teaching                         |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 17. Employ interactive teaching                            |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 18. Teach by trial and error, seeking the best methodology |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |

### Domain 4: Activities currently used

- |  |         |          |             |         |              |                   |
|--|---------|----------|-------------|---------|--------------|-------------------|
|  | 1 Never | 2 Rarely | 3 Sometimes | 4 Often | 5 Every time |                   |
| 19. Games                                  |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 20. Quizzes                                |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 21. Songs and chants                       |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 22. Story-based activities                 |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 23. Cross-curricular activities            |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 24. Art and craft (Making things)          |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |
| 25. Rote-memorization of phrases and words |         |          |             |         |              | 1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5 |

26. Children repeating words and phrases after the teacher	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
27. Role play using dialogues	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
28. Listening to CDs and tapes	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
29. Watch TV and DVDs	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
30. Computer-assisted activities	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
31. Teaching grammar	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
32. Reading and writing	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5

Domain 5: Expected effects of interactive teaching

Strongly disagree	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	Strongly disagree
33. To get accustomed to basic expressions	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	
34. To develop listening abilities	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	
35. To develop pronunciation and English rhythm	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	
36. To perceive English as a communication tool	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	
37. To deepen intercultural understanding	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	
38. To enhance willingness to communicate	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5	

Domain 6: Teacher actions/strategies for interactive teaching

39. Use Classroom English (CE) in class	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
40. Use English other than CE	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
41. Introduce phrases and words in meaningful contexts	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
42. Get pupils to use phrases and words in meaningful communication	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
43. Provide pupils with as many opportunities for language use as possible	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
44. Create atmosphere to prompt active interaction	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
45. Assist pupil learning through questions and clues	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
46. Improvise questions and hints according to pupil responses	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
47. Employ classroom management strategies for classroom interaction	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
48. Prompt peer interaction by adopting pair work and group work	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
49. Choose interesting topics and activities to encourage active language use	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5

Domain 7: Pupil responses to interactive teaching in English

50. Understand Classroom English	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
51. Show interest in English interaction	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
52. Understanding questions and explanations in English	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
53. Try to respond to questions in English	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
54. Try to initiate utterances in English	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5
55. Increased motivation to learn English	1 • 2 • 3 • 4 • 5

## Appendix 2: Survey results

Figure 1: Types of schools

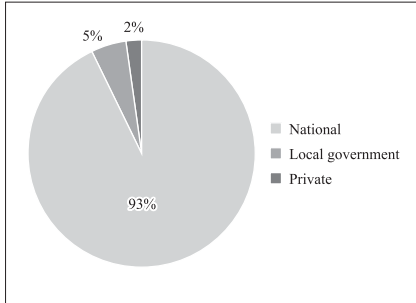


Figure 4: Years of primary teaching

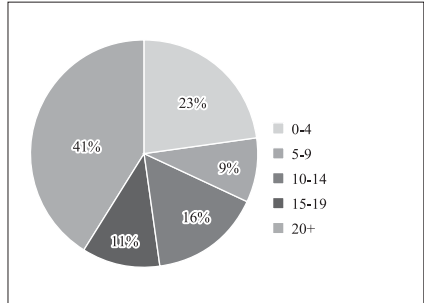


Figure 2: Year group to teach

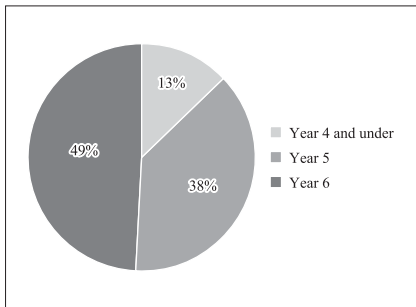


Figure 5: Years of teaching primary English

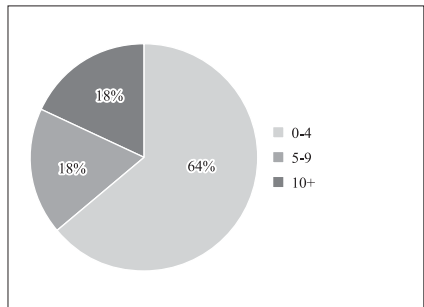


Figure 3: Gender of respondents

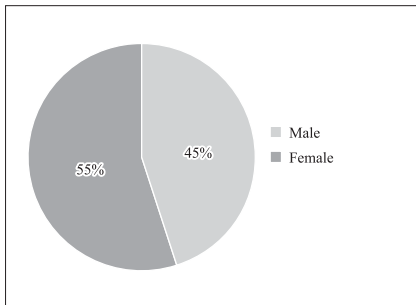


Figure 6: Teaching position

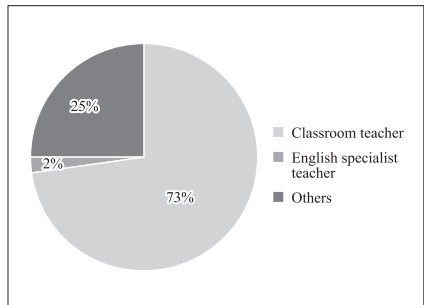


Figure 7: Self-assessed English proficiency

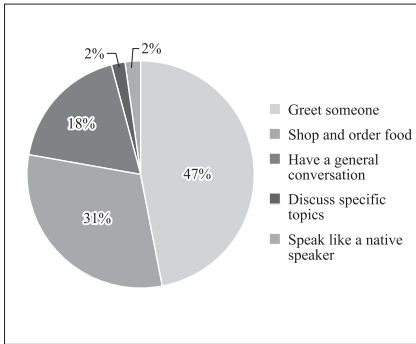


Figure 10: Attendance on theoretical courses in in-service training

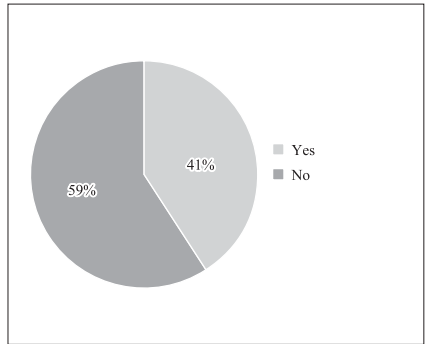


Figure 8: Attendance on theoretical courses in pre-service training

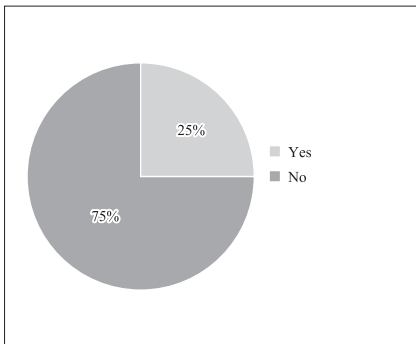


Figure 11: Attendance on practical courses in in-service training

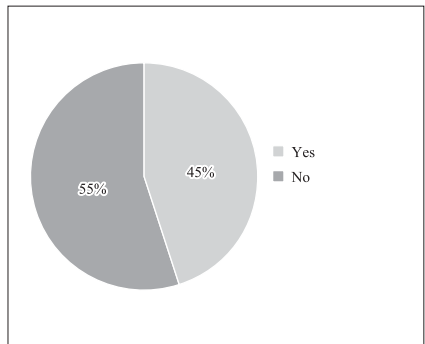


Figure 9: Attendance on practical sessions in pre-service training

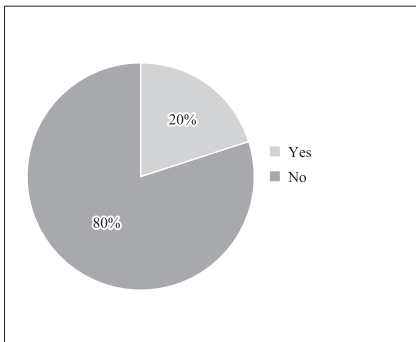


Figure 12: Willingness to take practical training

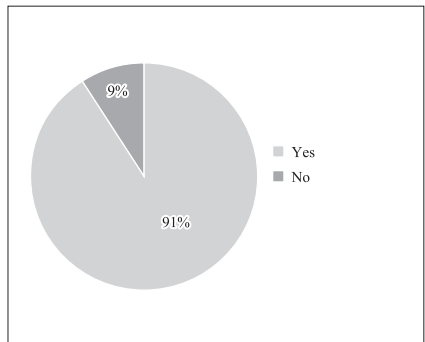


Figure 13: Willingness to exchange ideas with other teachers

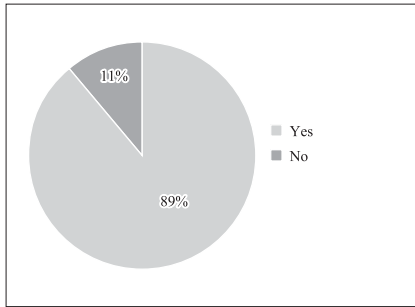


Figure 14: Methodology adopted

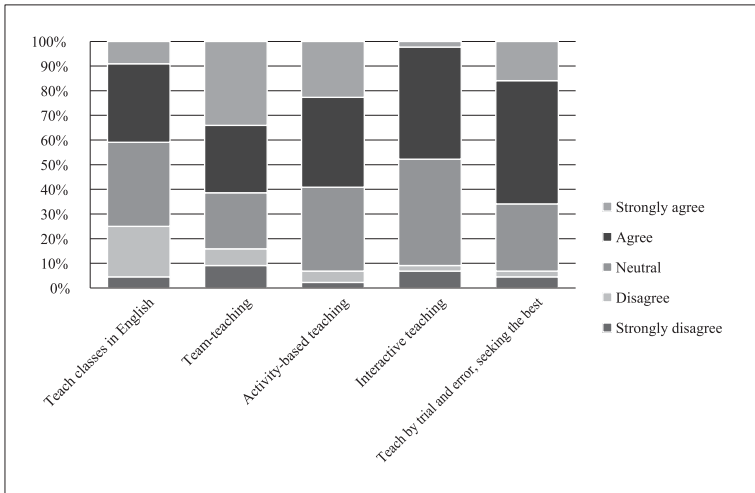




Figure 15: Activities used in class

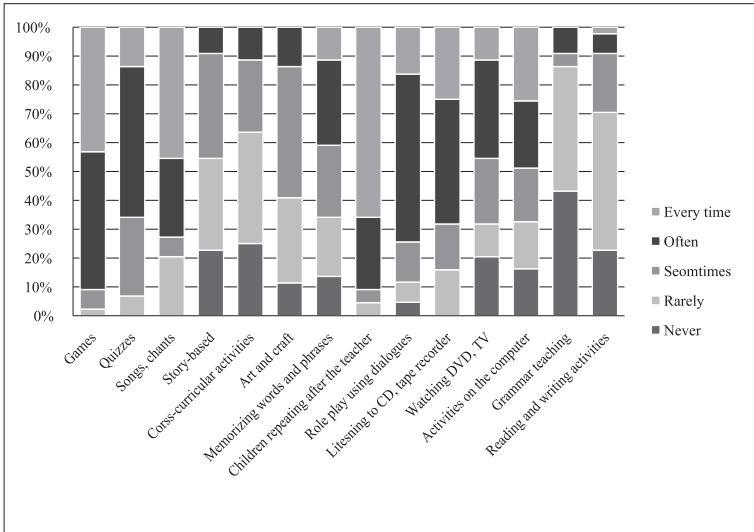


Figure 16: Effects of interactive teaching

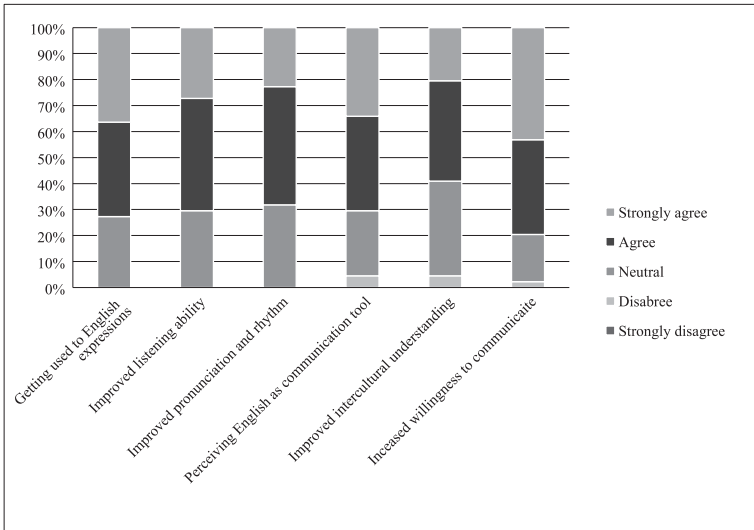


Figure 17: Teacher actions/strategies

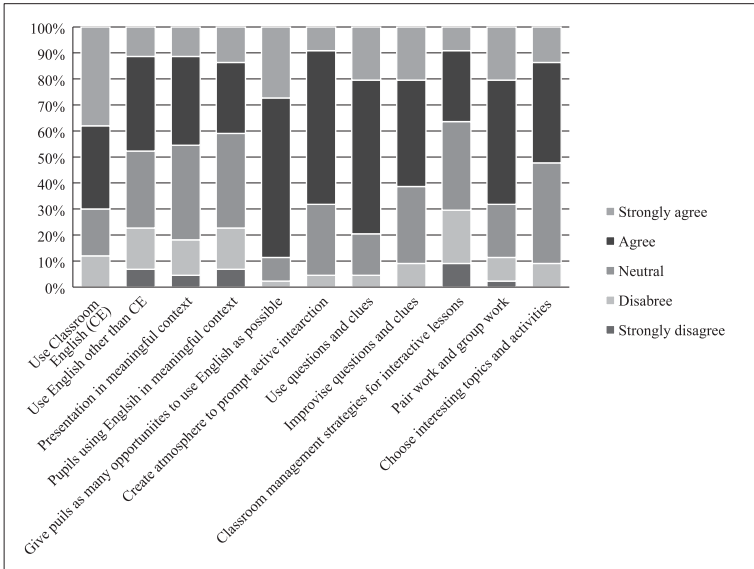


Figure 18: Pupil responses to English interaction

