

Pedagogical Strategies for Japanese Students with English Learning Difficulties and the Transformation of Student Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

Since 2020, Japanese elementary schools have implemented English education from third grade. This study addresses students with learning difficulties who have negative perceptions of English, using practical measures such as ICT-based learning, integrated subjects, and student reflection, reducing negative perceptions from 14.62% to 11.5%. The study concludes that flexible and diverse teaching strategies, including audio learning, are essential to alleviate negative perceptions and promote positive English learning experiences.

Keywords: Classroom-based practical report, transformation of student perceptions, students with learning difficulties

INTRODUCTION

In Japanese elementary schools, English education has been implemented starting from the third grade since 2020. Despite efforts to promote English learning, an increasing number of students express that they do not enjoy studying English, presumably because of curriculum overload and evaluation of their performance (Abe & Kaneshige, 2023b). To tackle this challenge and encourage a positive approach to learning, this study aimed to conduct practical research (Abe & Kaneshige, 2023ab).

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RESEARCH PROCESS

This paper first outlines the structure of English education in Japanese elementary

schools and then introduces methods to encourage active learning among 40 students. In Japanese public schools, English education was expanded, twice-weekly 45-minute classes for fifth and sixth graders. Given its novelty, instructional methods, evaluation techniques, and teacher training are continually being improved. Japanese public schools typically have large classes, up to 40 students, sometimes 45 including special needs students. One teacher is often in charge of such classes, which may be a psychological and practical burden.

In their 2023 study, Abe and Kaneshige (2023a) examined classroom implementations with around 40 students, incorporating regular student reflections. A four-point Likert survey revealed that many students found English “difficult” or “not enjoyable.” These students showed passivity in open-ended reflections, highlighting classroom challenges. To support these students, the study used individual interactions, proficiency assessments, checklists (Hayashida et al., 2022), and interviews to identify and address learning difficulties, informing instructional strategies (Abe & Kaneshige, 2023b).

METHODS

Participants

The study involved 150 sixth-grade students whom the first author taught in the 2023 academic year. Our (Abe & Kaneshige, 2023a) affective survey was used to identify students who had negative perceptions of English. In the survey, students answered whether they liked English or enjoyed English classes. In a four-point Likert scale, we categorised students as “having negative perceptions of English” when they answered negatively to both liking and enjoyment. Additionally, the checklist proposed by Hayashida et al. (2022) was used to identify children who needed individual or special support.

As a result, of 19 students with negative perceptions of English, 10 received additional support (10 targeted students and 9 non-targeted students). Some students who were not selected for individual support showed reluctance to actively participate despite performing well, from the author’s impression.

Implementation Period and Process

The implementation period spanned from July 2023 to March 2024, covering the academic year until the graduation of the sixth graders. The general flow of the implementation and the emphasised teaching methods each month, to support students with negative perceptions of English, are shown in Table 1 and Table 2 respectively.

Table 1
The general flow of practice

Year	Month	Flow
2023	July	Initial affective survey (four-point Likert scale proposed by Abe & Kaneshige, 2023b) on foreign language perception
	August	Selection of students with negative perceptions (10 students) Planning of measures using Hayashida et al.'s (2022) checklist
	September-February	Introduction of strategies to promote metacognition and reduce anxiety through student reflection and individual interactions
2024	March	Second affective survey on foreign language attitudes (the same structure of the survey as in July)

Table 2
Monthly emphasised teaching methods to support students with negative perceptions

Year	Month	Topics
2023	September	Audio learning: Individual learning using audio resources (chants and basic expressions) to address difficulties with pronunciation
	October-November	Integration with other subjects: Learning content linked to other subjects (science and home economics) to enhance learning motivation
2024	February	Video exchanges: Exchange videos in English with students from the prospective middle school for authentic activities

Note. Throughout the entire practice, individual interactions and reflections were also implemented to help students positively perceive their learning and reduce anxiety (Metacognitive Skills Enhancement)

DETAILED ANALYSIS OF CHANGES

Pre-and Post-survey on Foreign Language Attitudes

The pre- and post-surveys revealed a decrease in students with negative perceptions of foreign languages from 19 out of 130 (14.62%) to 13 out of 113 (11.5%). This indicates an overall improvement in students' attitudes towards English learning. The following sections provide a qualitative analysis of these changes.

Changes Among Targeted Students

Among the 10 students targeted using the checklist, two showed a reduction in negative perceptions, three maintained their negative perceptions, and five did not respond to the post-survey. Improved students gained confidence by not relying on phonetic readings in Japanese and mastering basic expressions and chants. Those who maintained negative perceptions enjoyed science-related activities but struggled to develop an interest in English. The five non-respondents were affected by external factors like illness and needed more individualised attention, underscoring the necessity for ongoing, personalised support.

Although the number of children whose negative perception improved was limited, some students changed their perceptions. The approach of engaging students individually and attracting them with not only English but also other subject contents would be worth future studies.

Changes Among Non-Targeted Students

At the first survey in July, nine students fell into this category. Positively, seven students of those students reported improved perceptions post-survey, indicating that interventions also benefited others. Universal design and supportive classroom environments contributed to this positive change according to the second affective survey in March.

Conversely, six students developed negative perceptions post-survey, with three not responding initially. Exam pressure and evaluation may contribute to their anxiety. One class showed declining motivation, despite increased practice and ICT use. However, video exchanges with middle school students boosted engagement, suggesting that reducing evaluation anxiety and offering purposeful activities can enhance motivation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this practical research, three main approaches—ICT utilisation, Integration with Other Subjects, and Metacognitive Skills Enhancement—were used throughout the year to address students' negative perceptions of English. Although the research design did not allow for identifying which approach was the most effective, the number of students with negative perceptions decreased.

A key factor in students' dislike for English was the perception of not understanding the language. Confidence-building measures, such as reading without phonetic aids, are needed before encouraging speaking or writing. This study found that students who solidified basic expressions and gained confidence overcame negative perceptions. Special support checklists effectively influenced even non-targeted students, though large classes limit individualised interactions, emphasising the need for flexible teaching strategies.

Addressing new negative perceptions is crucial as learning complexity increases. Reducing evaluation anxiety, offering purposeful activities, and fostering group work can alleviate these perceptions. Various measures can enrich large classrooms, with non-evaluative activities also reducing anxiety. Given the time constraints in educational contexts like Japan, flexible approaches and diverse strategies tailored to students' needs are essential.

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