

Three Perspectives on English Language Activities in a Japanese Elementary School: With a View to Clarifying a Role and Methodology for Songs in the New National Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper presents three perspectives on a visiting English Language Activities project at a Japanese elementary school. The project was designed and delivered by Bukkyo University Faculty of Education undergraduates and included traditional and purpose-written songs led by a native English speaker (the author of this paper). By content-analyzing open feedback from the elementary school pupils, their in-service teachers, and the undergraduates leading the project, this paper attempts to derive, from this small sample, preliminary themes and priorities to aid optimization of Foreign Language Activities (FLA) materials. The findings of this paper suggest that the multi-sensory nature and memorability of songs and singing-games may afford an effective strategy-based foundation for FLA, and one which is not only enjoyable for pupils but also, importantly, sympathetic to teachers in the forthcoming new Japanese elementary school curriculum.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Rationale

Under new national curriculum guidelines laid down in March 2008 by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (*Monbukagakusho* or *Monkasho* for short), English is to be taught in the 5th and 6th grades of all elementary schools in Japan from April 2011. More specifically, this English is designated as Foreign Language Activities (FLA) or *gaikokugokatsudo* with the emphasis on “*trying to have pupils understand language and culture experientially*”, in other words, learning by immersion rather than bookwork. In advance of the target date, some schools have already initiated their own programs, or are experimenting with special projects, and there are numerous workbooks and teachers’ guides under trial and development at local, regional and national levels.

This precursor to compulsory 5th and 6th grade English reflects not only instances of eagerness and good preparation but also a certain nervousness surrounding the plan. For some in-service principals and teachers, it represents a significant change in job description. How will the pupils cope? Perhaps more pressingly, how will the teachers cope? If, as the guidelines imply, this program is to be delivered in the main by homeroom teachers, those who have had hitherto no aptitude or interest, not to mention post-school experience, in English may be justifiably alarmed.

Whilst in theory the earlier a child starts to learn a foreign language the easier it is, the fact remains that English is something of a thorn in the side of Japan’s national curriculum and fraught with problems for schools,

teachers, and students and their families (McVeigh 2002). These problems may culminate in poor performance or dislike of English at the individual level, with multiple student resistance adding up to an affective barrier for teachers to confront and overcome before they can begin to teach effectively (Krashen 1985).

It has already been documented (Greenland 2009a) that at university level, songs offer an effective softener to some of these affective barriers by, for example, building communality in the classroom, easing inconspicuous participation and changing the mood from one of work and struggle to one more usually associated with leisure and relaxation. With a view to maximizing wellbeing and effectiveness for both teachers and pupils in the learning environment at all levels, this paper sets out to investigate the role and methodology for English songs in an elementary school curriculum.

1.2 Research Context

The research data employed in this paper derives from a collaborative project in which Bukkyo University Faculty of Education undergraduates (pre-service teachers) delivered a two-day English program at a public elementary school in Kyoto in February 2010. This took place as part of an ongoing scheme with Kyoto City Government, by which Bukkyo University Faculty of Education students are granted teaching practice access to local schools. In this particular project the remit was for the undergraduates to plan and conduct English language activities (ELA) with a 5th grade and a 6th grade class. In doing so they enlisted the assistance of the author (FG), a native English speaker, to devise and lead songs as part of their class activities. The total project time per class was

5 hours, 2.5 hours each day.

For the purposes of this paper it is not deemed necessary to provide the class plans in detail but only to note the teaching approach / methodology, topics covered, and songs employed to augment the classroom activities.

The teaching methodology was 'All-English' based on a total immersion program in which no Japanese was spoken or allowed. The emphasis was on Foreign Language Activities (FLA) as opposed to an autocratic or didactic approach. A team-teaching method with four or more undergraduates teaching in each class, with the co-operation of homeroom teachers, went some way towards facilitating the pupils' experience of total immersion. Thematically, the principal contents were: Self-introductions, Likes and Favorites (colors, food), Days of the Week, and Body-parts.

The supporting songs were as follows:

Head and Shoulders (traditional)

Hokey Cokey (traditional)

One Finger One Thumb Keep Moving (traditional)

The Night is Black (adapted from trad. by FG)

Today's Monday (adapted from trad. by FG)

Ongoing notes on the development and delivery of these songs are available on the author's website.

The native speaker (FG) was also required to deliver some other activities: story reading with picture book (Carle 1987), *Simon Says* (spontaneously incorporated into the teaching of another song), mini-interviews using a toy microphone in the final session, and had been pre-recorded as one of four self-introductions shown on DVD.

1.3 Research Methodology

Post-project open feedback was collected from three sources: Elementary school pupils (target students in the 6th grade home-room class); Undergraduates of Bukkyo University Faculty of Education (pre-service teachers); In-service elementary school teachers and staff (observing). All feedback was from L1 speakers of Japanese, was originally received in Japanese, and has been translated to English for the purposes of this paper.

In this paper the feedback comments are content-analysed in order to establish key themes and the relative importance of these key themes. Some broad comparisons are drawn with related research in university EFL classes (Greenland 2009b). By cross-referencing the feedback, some pointers for subsequent research are derived and some recommendations are made for future materials development and teaching methods.

2. Three Perspectives

This section presents and analyses the post-project open feedback comments collected from three sources at a Kyoto elementary school:

Elementary School Pupils (6th grade)

- open feedback on their experience of the ELA project (n=20)

University Faculty of Education Undergraduates (Pre-Service Teachers)

- comments focused on the role of songs in the ELA project (n=9)

In-Service Elementary School Teachers

- notes based on observation of the project (n=9)
- reactions to FLA in the forthcoming new curriculum (n=11)

2.1 Feedback from Elementary School Pupils

Open feedback in the form of free-written papers (in Japanese) was obtained from twenty 6th grade pupils. These afforded qualitative data on the pupils' reactions to the two-day ELA program. This data, interpreted into the form of 119 comments, enabled the establishment of key themes and ranking of their relative importance. Furthermore, a focus index was calculated based on the number of times per-pupil a theme was mentioned.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, consisting largely of expressions of enjoyment, fun, and interest, either general or associated with particular activities. Comments that might be construed as negative, such as expressions of difficulty, were generally tempered with corollaries, for example:

- *It was difficult but I enjoyed it (M)*
- *It was difficult but by day two I understood so I was happy. (F)*
- *I thought 'All-English' would be impossible, but actually I could understand what I should do. (F)*

A preliminary content analysis, ranking frequency of comment types, is presented in Fig. 1 below.

The most frequent comments pertained to enjoyment of songs, either general or specifying one song or another. This is followed closely by enjoyment of physical activity (much of which was associated with the songs in the form of actions). These are followed by comments indicating

**Fig. 1. Feedback from Elementary School Pupils
Preliminary Content Analysis**

Comments	Frequency	%	Cumulative
I enjoyed singing/songs	19	16	16
I enjoyed actions	16	13	29
It was difficult (but fun)	14	12	41
I enjoyed talking/speaking	10	8	50
It was difficult (but I somehow/eventually understood)	10	8	58
I enjoyed games	8	7	65
I enjoyed English	8	7	71
I want to continue	7	6	77
I want to be able to speak English	6	5	82
Thanks	5	4	87
I enjoyed the DVD	4	3	90
It was difficult (no Japanese)	4	3	93
I want to see you again	3	3	96
I want to use it in my life	2	2	97
I enjoyed the worksheets	1	1	98
I can remember what I learned	1	1	99
I will treasure the memory	1	1	100
Total	119	100	

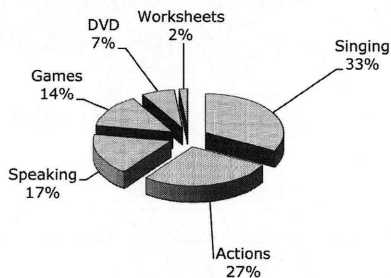
that although difficult, pupils found that they were able to enjoy, communicate, speak, understand or function in an ‘All-English’ environment.

Following the precedent of previous similar research at university level (Greenland 2009b), comments were divided into four key areas: Activities, Atmosphere, Practical Aspects, and Other (Fig. 2) and allocated a focus index derived from Frequency/Population. A focus index of 1 indicates that, on average, each student mentions a topic once. It was found that pupils focused mainly on the specific activities that they performed (or rather, enjoyed), with songs and actions appearing at the top of that list and worksheets at the bottom. Based on the Activities data in Fig. 2, Fig. 3 shows the relative proportions of comments on enjoyment of respective activities.

**Fig. 2. Feedback from Elementary School Pupils
Frequency and Focus Index on Key Themes**

Comments	Frequency	%	Focus Index
1. ACTIVITIES			
I enjoyed singing/songs	19	16	0.95
I enjoyed actions	16	13	0.80
I enjoyed talking/speaking	10	8	0.50
I enjoyed games	8	7	0.40
I enjoyed the DVD	4	3	0.20
I enjoyed the worksheets	1	1	0.05
Subtotal	58	49	2.90
2. STYLE/ATMOSPHERE			
Difficult (but fun)	14	12	0.70
Difficult (but I somehow/eventually understood)	10	8	0.50
I enjoyed English	8	7	0.40
Difficult (no Japanese)	4	3	0.20
Subtotal	36	30	1.80
3. PRACTICAL ASPECTS			
I want to continue	7	6	0.35
I want to be able to speak English	6	5	0.30
I want to use it in my life	2	2	0.10
I can remember what I learned	1	1	0.05
Subtotal	16	13	0.80
4. OTHER			
Thanks	5	4	0.25
I want to see you again	3	3	0.15
I will treasure the memory	1	1	0.05
Subtotal	9	8	0.45
Grand total	119	100	5.95

**Fig. 3. Feedback from Elementary School Pupils
Positive Comments on Activities - Frequency (%)**



Comparison with similar data previously collected from university students (Greenland 2009a), Fig. 4, suggests that at the elementary school level pupils were generally the more vociferous in their feedback, making an average of 5.95 comments each, as opposed to 2.26 by university EFL students. Notwithstanding other possible contributing factors, this may be tentatively interpreted as greater enthusiasm or excitement in the elementary population towards the class or materials. The appeal of songs dominated feedback in both populations but was a subject of greater focus in the younger pupils and, when combined with the apparent appeal of physical actions (largely inapplicable in the university case) may be deemed to constitute a major contributing factor to overall student enjoyment of the ELA project.

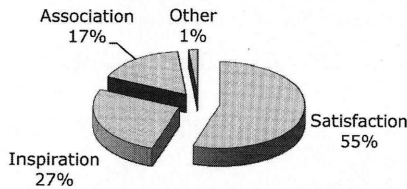
Fig. 4. Elementary School Pupils (n=20) vs University EFL Students (n=105) Feedback-Focus Index on Key Themes
(where 1 = average frequency of 1 per student)

University EFL Students	Focus Index	Elementary School Pupils	Focus Index
1. ACTIVITIES	1.28	1. ACTIVITIES	2.90
Including:		Including:	
i Singing	0.46	i Singing	0.95
ii Talking/Speaking	0.44	ii Other (Actions)	0.80
iii TV/DVD	0.11	iii Talking/Speaking	0.50
iv CD Music	0.09	iv Games/Quizzes	0.40
v Text/Prints	0.05	v DVD/TV	0.20
vi Games/Quizzes	0.04	vi Text/Prints	0.05
vii Other (Drawing)	0.09	vii CD Music	n/a
2. STYLE/ATMOSPHERE	0.51	2. STYLE/ATMOSPHERE	1.80
Enjoyable etc.			
3. PRACTICAL ASPECTS	0.44	3. PRACTICAL ASPECTS	0.80
Relevance, Utility etc.			
4. OTHER	0.03	4. OTHER	0.45
Thanks etc.			
Total	2.26	Total	5.95

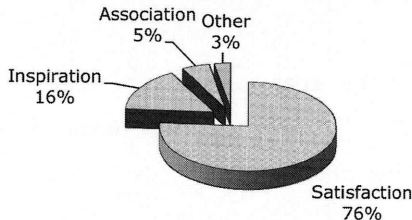
In a second comparison between elementary pupils' and university students' feedback (Greenland 2009a), Figs. 5 and 6 represent a classification of feedback data into expressions of Satisfaction (enjoyment, achievement etc), Association (making connections with existing experience/knowledge) and Inspiration (to continue, to study further etc). Whilst university students were more inclined to consciously relate the class to existing knowledge and experience, and indeed to feel (at least in the moment) inspired to pursue the topics afterwards, elementary students focused more on their awareness of pleasure derived from the activities, a pleasure which included the satisfaction of achievement in functioning, possibly for the first time, in an 'All-English' environment i.e. discovering at least a strategic competence.

Finally, a note on the specific songs mentioned in the feedback. It was notable that eight of the 20 pupils specifically indicated *The Night is*

**Fig. 5. Student Feedback: University Song Workshop (n=105)
Positive Comments - Frequency (%) Along Key Dimensions**



**Fig. 6. Pupil Feedback: Elementary School ELA Project (n=20)
Positive Comments - Frequency (%) Along Key Dimensions**



Black in their feedback as a song they found funny, enjoyable or interesting. As a new song, designed specifically for their purposes, it may therefore be considered relatively successful. This song comprises a logical series of objects and their colors with associated actions, animal sounds, blowing and other non-linguistic vocalizations. From the comments we were able to know which parts of it were especially popular, which should help us write, adapt or present other songs. Detailed notes on this song and its presentation are given on the author's website. By the same means we had hoped to rank this and other songs by frequency of mention, however, the next most frequently mentioned songs/activities were *Head and Shoulders* and *Simon Says*, both of which were already familiar to the pupils through previous study or Japanese versions. With this in mind, we cannot be sure whether these were indeed the most popular or simply the easiest to name. It is also worth noting that pupils rarely referred to the songs by title, but rather by their associated actions or non-language vocalizations, for example,

- *When we [pretend to] blow out a candle and FG tries to catch someone it's fun (F) (The Night is Black)*
- *FG's shake dance was very funny, I was killing myself laughing! (M) (Hokey Cokey)*
- *My favorite was the pink pig oink — it was so funny (M) (The Night is Black)*

so it is not clear whether they found the most active songs the most enjoyable, memorable or simply the easiest to specify. One may suspect the former, but it is not proven.

2. 2. Feedback from Faculty of Education Undergraduates (Pre-Service Teachers)

Open feedback in the form of free-written papers (in Japanese) was obtained from nine education undergraduates (pre-service teachers) who devised the two-day ELA project. All are intending to become elementary school teachers and, as such, are critical thinkers with a specialist viewpoint. Their comments afforded qualitative data on their and pupils' perceived reactions to the song activities. Interpreted into the form of 62 comments, this data enabled the establishment of key themes and the ranking of their relative importance.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and focused on perceived benefits of songs and singing the classroom. It is not possible to know whether there is a negative counterpart that was not shared for reasons of manners or otherwise. There were three additional observations, given here for completeness and utility:

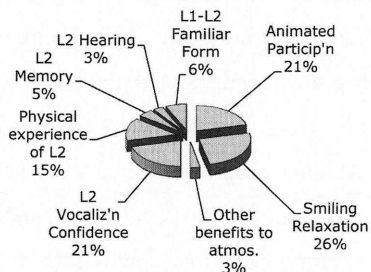
- *It was necessary to keep adding gestures for when the same actions are repeated the children become less animated. (M)*
- *The pupils seem to feel the native teachers are quite special. Although they are quite unfamiliar with native speakers, it seemed to me that their countenances (or the twinkle in their eyes) was much different from when they are taught by Japanese teachers. (F)*
- *It was good to make pupils come out front and make them participate in leading. For if FG only is out front, kids might have been more nervous. On the contrary, they were more relaxed to be led by their peers who they usually study together with. (M)*

A themed content analysis, ranking frequency of comment types, is presented in Fig. 7 and shows that comments could be divided into two categories: Class Atmosphere Benefits and Linguistic Benefits. Measured by comment frequency, the greater benefit of songs is on class atmosphere with the most obvious effects being to animate pupils into active participation. This is followed closely by causing pupils to both smile and relax, which, if combined, would exceed participation in importance. Related to this at the top of the Linguistic Benefits is the role of songs in facilitating vocalization of English including guiding by rhythm and tone. This latter combined with the Physical/bodily experience of language and expression through actions constitutes a full 33% of comments. A remainder group of comments pertains to the familiarity of the song form, in some cases

**Fig. 7. Feedback on Action Songs from Pre-service Teachers (n=9)
Key Themes by Frequency**

Key Themes	Comments	%
1. CLASS ATMOSPHERE BENEFITS		
Animated pupils/active participation	13	21
Smiling	8	13
Relax, reduce fear/tension	8	13
Smooth Flow	1	2
Relaxed the teachers by seeing kids smile	1	2
Subtotal	31	50
2. LINGUISTIC BENEFITS		
Ease vocalisation (rhythm, tone)	11	18
Physical experience of language/expression	9	15
Aids memory/retention	3	5
Hearing opportunity	2	3
Confidence in English	1	2
Repetition (develops fluency) without boredom	1	2
Subtotal	27	44
3. OTHER		
Familiar form (incl some J equivalents)	4	6
Total	62	100

Fig. 8. Pre-service Teachers' Perception of the Benefits of Songs as ELA Key Themes by Frequency (%)



due to a direct Japanese equivalent, which facilitates pupils' learning/adaptation/participation.

In so far as this small data set and comment frequency can be said to provide valid measures, Fig.8 provides an overview of the pre-service teachers' perception of the various kinds of benefits songs brought to their class in this project. In general the right side of the pie pertains to Class Atmosphere Benefits, and the left side to Linguistic Benefits. The L1-L2 Familiar Form category could be said to fall under both main themes.

2.3. Feedback from In-Service Elementary School Teachers

Post-session comments from observing in-service teachers and staff did not readily lend themselves to content analysis because the sample was very small and the returned themes were of a rather too disparate nature. At any rate, a selection of the pertinent comments is given below, and it has been possible to divide them into categories pertaining to Functioning in an 'All-English' Environment (Postives, Negatives/Suggestions), Movement, and Materials.

In the main it appeared that teachers and staff observing the ELA agreed that pupils could at least function in an ‘All-English’ environment. Whether or not pupils actually understood the language going on around them, and whether this mattered, was a contentious issue, with some teachers rejecting ‘All-English’ in favor of a J-E environment. There were also some concerns that since some materials were already known to the students, they were too easy or not suitable. Since the materials in question were those commented upon by pupils as being particularly enjoyable this raises a debate on the value of familiarity in an ‘All-English’ environment. Further comments highlight the pupils’ engagement with physical activity in the classroom, along with their reactions to the native teacher.

2. 3. 1. Selected Comments

On Pupils Functioning in an ‘All-English’ Environment

a) Positives

- *Although I think instructions were understood by the pupils by using gestures, I thought it was very good to see children try very hard to understand (or rather decipher) the English.*
- *I thought the ‘All-English’ lesson will enhance children’s motivation in listening to English, as the time and lessons go on.*
- *It was very good that I could see a very positive attitude, where pupils try to understand watching gestures even if they don’t understand some English. I thought, teachers should not believe that they have to teach everything.*
- *The ‘All-English’ class gave a good ‘tension’ to children, I think.*

- *I think as the time went on it got better and better.*

b) Negatives/Suggestions

- *I think we should enhance the support for kids who are at a loss for what to do in the 'All-English' circumstances (using big gestures and concrete/non-abstract materials or black board).*
- *Admitting the aim and purpose of the 'All-English' lesson, I still think we can start English activities basically in English and Japanese, for we are not going to get full ALT support in the elementary schools.*
- *Since all the directions were conducted in English only, kids don't necessarily understand, they just mimic what the next person does, disconnecting the words and meanings; this was what I felt.*
- *In order to do lessons only in English, tempo and modulation were very important, I thought.*

On Movement

- *While singing Head and Shoulders, kids were amused by the way the native teacher moved.*
- *I thought the practice of acquiring English naturally in conjunction with enjoying moving their bodies (and connecting the gestures with words) aroused their motivation.*
- *The happy, vigorous atmosphere had a palpable effect on the children.*

On Materials

- *I think children already knew Head and Shoulders so I felt*

slightly doubtful as to whether it was really suitable as a teaching material at the moment.

- *The activity where they colored-in their worksheet according to directions was of a somewhat lower level than the 6th graders' verbal abilities, I felt.*

Other (Miscellaneous Comments)

- *Above all, the way the native teacher drew the attention of the kids and enhanced their motivation was fantastic.*
- *In English activities I would like to develop a place or opportunities in which children can exchange communication in English, e. g. both teacher and pupils stand at the front, or pupils interact with each other, etc.*

The final data set is a summary of teacher comments on the forthcoming changes in curriculum, for the purposes of which this paper is written. Although around half the teachers are either wholly in favor or can see the benefits of the new ELA curriculum, there are as many qualifying fears in the form of detraction from other lessons such as basic Japanese literacy,

Fig. 9. In-Service Teachers' Reactions to ELA in the Forthcoming New Curriculum

	For	Neutral	Against
Supporting Comments	6	3	2
Detracting from other curriculum priorities	4		1
Burden on/difficult for teacher	2		
Teacher lacks confidence		1	
Difficult for the pupils	1		
Concerned not to cause pupils to hate English	1		
Emphasise communication with foreigners	1		
Evasive (politics?)			1

burden on the teacher, and concern for a potential negative impact on pupils. Furthermore, the neutral and opposing opinions appear rather intractable: lack of teacher confidence, other priorities and ‘generational reasons’ being cited. Although this survey represents a very small number of respondents, extrapolation to the national teaching community would anticipate considerable and varied antipathy.

3. Summary and Recommendations

Very different pictures have been obtained from three different viewpoints of ELA at a Kyoto elementary school. A substantial reason for the differences is that the subjects (pupils, pre-service teachers and in-service teachers) each have different priorities. The elementary school pupils, like the university students previously surveyed, appear to be focused mainly on their own satisfaction/enjoyment; in-service teachers appear focused on effectiveness/efficiency: pre-service teachers appear focused on first establishing feasible working relationships. In terms of data-compatibility, open feedback suffers from this disparity and ought to be followed by more intentionally compatible surveys of each group. One thing the three populations do seem to agree on, however, is that action songs can bring joy, energy, enthusiasm, partnership, and physical communication to the English language classroom. This partnership and physical communication occurs both between students and between teachers and students.

Presenting as the top attraction in both elementary school and university level feedback, songs potentially represent a significant tool for continued enjoyment of English throughout the education system. This would appear to fulfill the students’ priority. A trainee teacher must on the other

hand weigh elementary school pupils' enjoyment of familiar form or content against an in-service teacher's concern that it is not challenging enough.

The sum of this research suggests that there are benefits in both familiar and new material, and different challenges in each. The key for in-service teachers is to gradually introduce a varied series of action songs, so as to:

- bring both pleasure and challenge to students
- benefit the working relationships between students and teachers, and
- be effective in gradually advancing a variety of communication skills.

This latter may be achieved naturally and sequentially, first by physical means (bodily actions), secondly by developing associated social skills (such as smiling, confidence and interpretive strategies) and thirdly by allowing the emergence, evolution and refinement of associated language skills through familiarity and repetition.

To this end, the priority in such a short project is not so much for pupils to understand English precisely as for them to become able to participate in FLA without fear, and thus without sowing, or even preparing the ground for, the seeds of affective barriers. If only at a strategic competence level, the thrill of the ability to participate in communication via L2 action songs opens a door, rather than closing one or leaving it safely uninvestigated. This physical and social aptitude is an essential skill in L2 acquisition, and its converse, the inability or unwillingness to participate that is currently a significant barrier in university students, may thus be avoided.

On one hand the new curriculum has the potential to be fraught with problems. On the other hand it has equal potential to change the destiny

of the upcoming population from that jadedness which we currently see in universities to one where English has been enjoyed, valued and nurtured since childhood as a versatile and relevant social tool. In compulsory English education in Japanese elementary schools, we need not be primarily concerned with forcing perfect grammar and so on, but rather with nurturing children's innate willingness to engage, communicate and participate by whatever means they can muster. In this regard, cultivating strategic skills is vital and should be the first priority. From this research it appears that this cultivation is most effectively achieved in an environment of necessity, that is to say, in an 'All-English' environment. Towards this end, multi-faceted tools such as action songs, having melody, movement and other vocalizations supporting the lyrics, and learned by pressure-free repetition in a happy group environment, are a uniquely valuable social and educational currency. With continued experimentation, constant sharing of experience, and collaborative development of effective materials and methodologies specifically suited to delivery by native Japanese home room teachers and pupil peer-play, it seems likely that action songs based on adaptations of tried and tested traditional forms will come to constitute a vital core resource for English in Japanese elementary schools, to the benefit and pleasure of both teachers and students, not only in these schools but at all levels of the Japanese education system.

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