

The Introduction of Japanese Primary School
English Texts : Impressions and Reflections
of Assistant Language Teachers

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松 山 大 学
言語文化研究 第33巻第1号 (抜刷)
2013年9月

Matsuyama University
Studies in Language and Literature
Vol. 33 No. 1 September 2013

The Introduction of Japanese Primary School English Texts : Impressions and Reflections of Assistant Language Teachers

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Abstract : This research was conducted with support from the Matsuyama University Special fund of 2011. Its objective was to gauge the attitude and effectiveness of Assistant Language Teachers who are currently teaching English in Japanese Primary schools along with utilizing the new texts established by the Japanese government. Over the course of a year the author visited numerous elementary schools, attended workshops and conferences centred on Japanese English language education at the primary school 5th and 6th grade levels. Additionally, an internet survey was conducted to reach respondents all across Japan. With the introduction of the *Eigo Note* text in 2009 and the subsequent introduction of *Hi Friends* the following year, English education in Japanese primary schools has taken a more formal approach. This paper reports on those findings and in particular the impressions and reflections of Assistant Language Teachers currently tasked with utilizing these two texts alongside Japanese Teachers of English.

Key words : EFL, Eigo Note text, Hi Friends text, ESL, Japanese Primary School English

1. Introduction

Formal English language education in Japanese primary schools has a history dating back to the end of the Second World War when English began to be taught in middle schools. It has continued to expand throughout the school system where it is now formally taught in primary school for 5th and 6th graders as an additional

subject. While junior high and senior high English classes still focus on the grammar translation method, primary school language learning has centred on a more communicative approach. While the communicative approach has proven to be more concessive to actual language learning (Hattum, 2006, Bax, 2003 & Swan, 1985) actual implementation of positive instructional methods are still being examined and undertaken at the Japanese primary school level.

Despite the deliberation over teaching methods and techniques There is a realization within Japan today that globalization means that the Japanese people need a far higher level of English proficiency than has hitherto been the case (Honma & Takeshita, 2005). Answering the question of which method is more beneficial becomes complicated because although communicative methods have their advantages, they also have limitations (Butler, 2009). After many years of debate the Japanese Government agency MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) in 2009, approved the introduction of an English language text entitled *Eigo Note 1 & 2*. It combines a teacher book, student book, and CD for students at the 5th and 6th grade levels to interact with. Most classes are conducted with a JTE (Japanese Teacher of English) who is in most instances also the student's homeroom teacher. Accompanying the JTE is an ALT (Assistant Language Teacher). As a rule, ALT's are most often employed through the Japanese Governments JET (Japanese Exchange and Teaching) program.

The following year 2009, the *Eigo Note* was replaced by *Hi Friends*. The *Hi Friends* text follows a similar communicative language pattern of instruction as *Eigo Note* but also allows for more active student involvement with an interactive CD that can be played on a computer or connected to an IWB (Interactive White Board). A special budget for the purchase of IWB's was allocated specifically for English

language instruction although the IWB in theory could be used in primary schools for other subjects such as Science, Japanese, or Math. In practicality, all the tools for English language learning have been put into place. It is with this thought in mind that the author conducted research, surveying ALT's current experiences and reflections as to how English language learning has progressed since the introduction of formal texts in 2009.

2. Survey Results

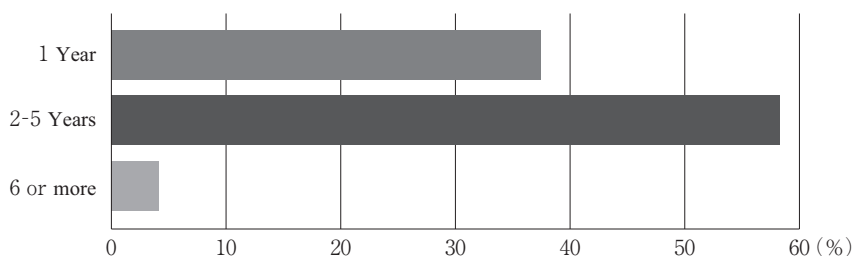
The primary information gathering method used in this research was through the use of an online tool entitled 'Survey Monkey'. According to its website it is the most popular online survey tool. Despite its somewhat unprofessionally sounding name, it is a very practical and powerful implement when there is a need to query large groups of respondents. Additional information gathering methods included observing primary school English lessons in Matsuyama and Imabari cities, Ehime, as well as attending conferences for Japanese educators in Takamatsu, Kagawa and Tokushima city, Tokushima prefecture. Finally, additional queries were solicited through e-mails to various ALTs throughout Japan.

The questionnaire was sent out to all AJET (Association of Japanese Exchange Teachers) via the JET internet link in each of the 47 prefectures. It was then posted on each of the prefectural AJET Facebook pages. An e-mail link was also available to respond via Microsoft Word but only a small percentage ($> 1\%$) took advantage of this option. Totally there were 100 respondents that replied via survey monkey.

By respondents their number of years as an ALT was as followed :

A. Years ALT ?

Answered : 72 Skipped : 0



Answer Choices	Responses
1 Year	37.50% 27
2-5 Year	58.33% 42
6 or more	4.17% 3
Total	72

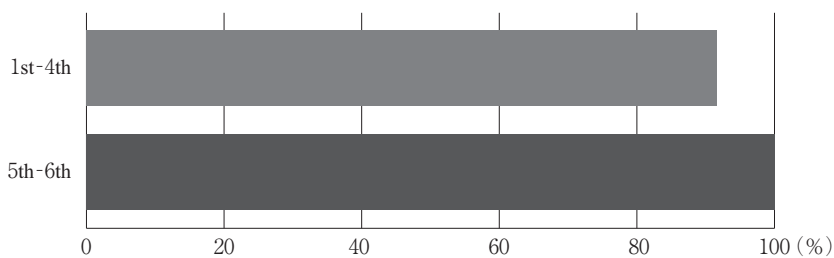
This was an important detail regarding the research since those ALTS with teaching experience of one year or less had probably not had the opportunity to utilize both Eigo Note and Hi Friends. All comments were considered though in the final survey question regarding personal experience using either or both of the texts. As per the JET regulations regarding employment (5 years maximum), the majority had not been teaching for more than 5 years. Those individuals teaching for 6 or more years were most likely independently employed by a town or city, although such personal information as school name, school district, and town or city was not collected or considered relevant to the research theme.

The next query examined which grades ALTs actually taught in the Japanese primary schools. This was also an significant finding since a vast majority of ALTs instruct at the lower levels (1st-4th) in addition to higher grades (5th & 6th). This was

of importance since it showed how English education has expanded throughout all the primary school years. There is definitely a need for a broader plan on formal English education classes at all levels. Currently the concentration of language education only exists for fifth and sixth graders. MEXT does not seem to realize how much of a demand there is for language education overall.

B. Which grades do you teach ? (please check one or both if they apply)

Answered : 72 Skipped : 0

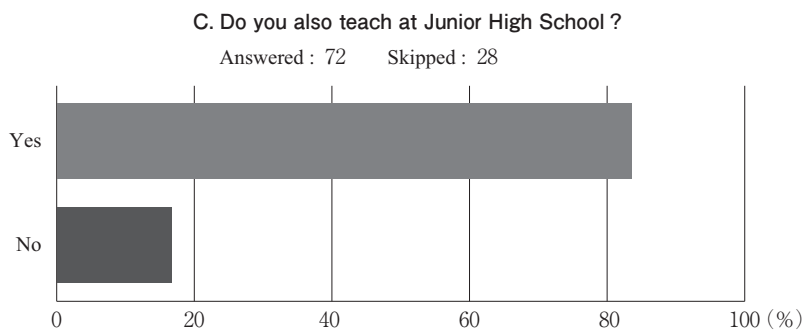


Answer Choices	Responses
1st-4th	91.67% 66
5th-6th	100% 72
Total Respondents : 72	

The future of English language education in Japan has to be examined more closely as Japanese children become exposed more and more. Larger amounts of teacher resources and monetary funds may need to be considered and allocated to fulfil such demands.

The next question concerned whether ALTs that were teaching at primary schools were also instructing English at the junior high school level. Initially, this was the reason why the JET program was formed. Over twenty years ago the

Japanese Government decided to bring native English speakers into junior high schools so Japanese students could listen to and interact with native speakers. This has continued to be so but now there is a bit of a disconnect as primary school English has taken a fun interactive communicative approach while junior high school English is rote memorization in preparation for senior high school entrance exams.



Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	83.33%	60
No	16.67%	12
Total		72

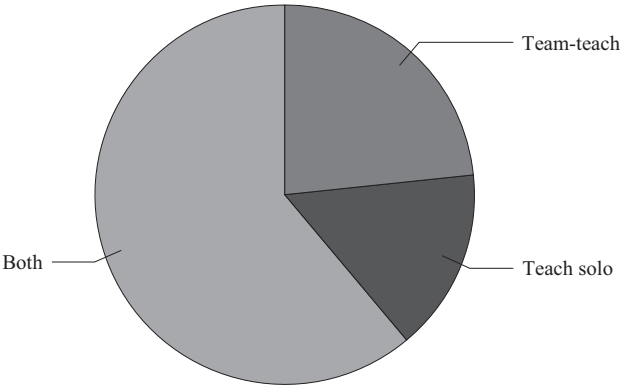
Exactly how the English language education was taking place was also an important finding since ALTs are not evenly spaced through the prefectures as well as throughout Japan. The allocation of ALTs in the JET program began in large cities (Tokyo, Osaka, and Nagoya) and eventually spread throughout Japan. The less sparsely populated areas eventually received ALTs as more and more individuals joined the program.

3. Instructional Methods

Teaching English at the primary schools is basically broken down into three separate instructional scenarios. The first is when the JTE which in most cases is also the students homeroom teacher instructs the learners in English as he or she would do for any other of the students classes. Since English instruction is now scheduled for 5th and 6th graders on a weekly or biweekly schedule, most often the ALT is not in attendance. Secondly, when the ALT is in attendance then the JTE will co-teach or team teach the students. This is naturally the preferred method but as previously mentioned it is not always feasible to class scheduling and other school

D. At the primary school do you ?

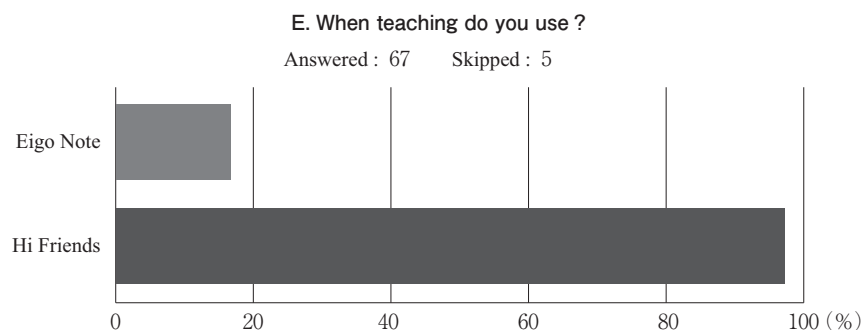
Answered : 72 Skipped : 28



Answer Choices	Responses	
Team-teach	23. 61%	17
Teach solo	15. 28%	11
Both	61. 11%	44
Total	72	

events which may involve the ALT at another primary or junior high school. The final option is when the ALT may teach the Japanese students solo, again due to scheduling or other events. This final method is the least preferred method since ALTs are not actually licensed to teach in Japanese schools. Additionally the lack of Japanese proficiency may hinder ALTs in their ability to explain and teach language points when they are tasked with teaching solo.

Regarding more specifics to the actual research intended, the next question in the survey asked which teaching material ALT's used with reference to the Eigo Note or Hi Friends. Since the Eigo Note has been formally replaced by Hi Friends it would be only logical that the majority of ALTs are using Hi Friends. This is reflected in the responses by the chart below.



Answer Choices	Responses	
Eigo Note	16.42%	11
Hi Friends	97.01%	65
Total Respondents 67		
Other (Please specify) (20) Expend		

4. Additional Materials

Not every ALT is comfortable with the Eigo Note or Hi Friends text. Numerous respondents mentioned this with regards to the fact that they use supplemental material a certain percentage of the time. This defeats the purpose of the English language text in that it has always been this author's understanding that one of the reasons for language texts was to make English class equal in content regardless of where a student might happen to be in Japan. Additionally, the burden of supplying extra or supplement materials most often falls on the ALT since the JTE is too busy with other duties to spend a large amount of time constructing lesson plans from scratch.

A motivational and cost factor then comes into being since it all depends on how much time and money the ALT is willing to spend. Some ALTs spend considerable amounts of time with their own materials development while others do just enough to get by. In the end it is the students who may or may not benefit from these additional materials.

5. ALT Comments

Observations and comments from ALTs have been divided into three sections, favourable, marginal, and unfavourable along with ease of technology access. This was done to allow for a clearer picture as to the strengths and weaknesses of the Eigo Note and Hi Friends.

Favourable comments concerning the texts mentioned that ;

"I really love the Hi Friends interactive DVD and how it helps avoid a lot of the common pitfalls of ES English (namely, the kids learning horribly incorrect grammar/pronunciation). My HRTs tend to use the DVD on the days I'm not there, so when I am visiting a class, I get to be an active participant instead of a tape recorder. I rarely ever recite sentences or vocab words, even at my JHS". (ALT, 2013)

"Hi, friends is good. It overlaps a bit with the junior high textbooks" (2013).

"I mostly enjoy using Hi Friends! because the listening activities are a realistic expectation of a 2 conversation one can expect to have in the real world and the kids are not always going to understand each individual word 100% of the time" (ALT 2013).

"I feel the focus on speaking and listening is good, and should be more gradually transitioned to the text-based work done in junior high. The songs on both hi friends and Eigo note are generally very good, though some students are loath to take part in some they see as too juvenile, musically or lyrically" (ALT 2013).

"Eigo Note was a good start. The best part was that there were ready-made team-teaching lesson plans and all the materials needed came right along with it (posters, teacher flashcards, music CD full of chants and listening drills). The content and illustrations for some of the book could have been better, but it was a solid teaching program. All I needed to do was train the HRTs a d empower them to be good team-teachers (in itself, quite a job!). Now with Hi, Friends we've got a much more challenging and interesting presentation of mostly the same course content, better textbook design and illustrations, better activities, etc. The DVDrom is GREAT because it gets the kids' attention, the HRTs feel empowered to use it, and I like it because it gives the kids a variety of input: different voices and accents, videos of foreign countries, a native speaker pronunciation video guide (I doubt the teachers use it though), all the chants, listening, etc. is in one accessible place. The drawback is we don't get nice flashcards-we are expected to print them off the DVD rom and the teachers are NEVER prepared for the lesson so we never have images printed in time or at all" (ALT 2013).

"I'm a first-year JET so I didn't experience Eigo Note and have no basis for comparison, but so far I am very satisfied with Hi Friends. I like that the focus is on speaking and acquiring lots of basic expressions and vocabulary. I also enjoy the focus on internationalization (listening clips of children from different countries, differences between

Japanese and Western storefronts, etc. etc.) I think this is a good way to introduce children to English and a good framework in which to set up their minds. I want them to understand, first and foremost, that English is important for international communication, which can be a difficult concept to root in the minds of children that young. The textbook uses recurring characters who are Japanese so I think this creates a friendly/comfortable environment for them to learn in. I use the book as a guideline ; I don't do every activity, but I pick and choose and supplement with activities of my own choosing as well. I think there is a good balance of visual, aural and oral communication, though I usually try to place more emphasis on individual speaking than the book does. I also do a lot of phonics which the book doesn't touch on. I've heard a few teachers say they finish the book quickly, but in the 6 months since I've been here, I haven't found it to be too little material" (ALT 2013).

"I'm actually very impressed with Hi Friends. When I compare my Junior High School students' willingness talk when I first came, and the level if speaking, I feel as though junior high school textbooks will need to soon change because the incoming students are so advanced. Hi Friends really digs into the students the phrases, "What's this ?" and "It's a ~." and "I like ~." It's fantastic they are so confident with these phrases and then can focus in vocabulary. It makes my job at Jr. High easier because then we can focus on verbs and not strain on objects. I do think elementary students should be able to confidently use more sentences. By the 6th grade, I think a simple self-introduction (where you are from/how old you are) should be simple. I find the initiative of the Head English Teacher impacts greatly the motivation of students. While at some schools I have students telling me how old there are and what they like, at others, they seem confused at my use of these words. Overall, I'm impressed with Hi Friends. It seems to be a good introduction to my junior high school's New Crown text" (ALT 2013).

Contrasting these comments were ALTs that point out faults in the Eigo Note and Hi Friends such as ;

"I wish the teacher's edition came in both English and Japanese, so that sharing and understanding upcoming lesson topics with Japanese teachers was easier". (ALT, 2013)

"I am not very happy with the Hi. Friends. I find that the material is too difficult, and that the textbook uses too much Japanese. If a school is teaching children from 1st year, I

believe that by the time that they get to 5th year, then it is expected that they should be able to do simple directions in English. I understand that we are only supposed to acquaint the students with English, not teach them proper English. But things like “what would you like” is too complex for an ALT to explain using only English. This material forces us to have to use Japanese, or we have to be an extremely talented teacher to adequately explain things so the students aren’t confused, and I know that I am not that perfect of a teacher to explain some things the Hi, Friends! wants to teach” (ALT, 2013).

“There are four ALTs in our town, and I’m mostly in the junior high, though I do teach in elementary and kindergartens from time to time. Coming at it from a junior high perspective, I find the Hi Friends is better than Eigo Note in some ways, but basically both books are just a waste of time. The students are not learning English as much as set phrases that don’t necessarily translate into real world situations. They are learning vocabulary, but much of what they learn was taught to them in younger grades (colors, numbers, animals, fruits, vegetables). Neither Eigo Note nor Hi Friends actually prepares the students for real English learning in junior high” (ALT 2013).

“The text and its activities are usually very boring, or strange. They encourage using weird English. There are many times when I refuse to use what the text says and teach the kids closer to what we actually say. Honestly, I am usually horrified with the poor grammar the books seem to want us to teach. However, convincing my JTEs to change from the book is near impossible. Also the book uses horrible example and teaches the kids really poor translations and word choices. I wish we could just throw out these horrible “resources” and just let us teach them ourselves... or at least let the JTEs know that is OK to do so” (ALT 2013).

“I personally don’t like Hi friends. My school doesn’t have the technology available to use the DVD resources. So we don’t use any of the songs/chants. When I can take my computer to class, the DVD is too slow and clunky to be useful. The Hi Friends teacher’s manual is all in Japanese” (ALT 2013).

“I tried to avoid using Eigo Note or Hi friends as much as possible. In Iwaki the students have been doing English since the first grade so much of the books were too easy for them. I also find it amazing that the books contained barely any English in them. Most of the time the dialogue and vocab the students were expected to remember were not even written down. This is crazy!” (ALT 2013).

"The chants are pretty awful and could be improved and I think it wouldn't hurt to put in some English words if only to get the kids used to seeing them. Nice and bright textbook though and appealing to the students (hi friends)" (ALT 2013).

"When I was hired to come here, it was known that I do not speak/read Japanese. I could not do my job for the entirety of this year because I could not communicate effectively about this new book. If it is known that many of us do not know Japanese, then the new books should not be released and accepted without a complete English translation of the teacher's manual. This was an unnecessarily difficult year" (ALT 2013).

"The jump between elementary and junior high is quite large. With Eigo Note and Hi Friends, there is not much opportunity to practice writing in English, and then all of a sudden in junior high, the focus is all on writing. It would be great to get more consistency in focus across the elementary and junior high textbooks" (ALT 2013).

And finally there were individuals who felt slightly indifferent to the use of the texts. Additionally, although Hi Friends has been prescribed by the MEXT there still seem to be some areas that are still not following government policies at least by some comments that were submitted.

"I used Eigo note my first year, and Hi Friends my second. I did not rely heavily on them, but more or less chose a few of the activities I liked to use in class. Sometimes the teacher would specify which activity they wanted to do, and lead it. Sometimes not. There were a few activities I did find useful, and a few that I never used" (ALT, 2013).

"I don't know what Eigo Note or Hi Friends is. I visit my primary school class once a month. The class has very young beginner English students. We mostly play games like fruits basket and sing songs. Every time I visit the class, I am amazed because their ability grows in leaps and bounds every day. I have issues with the over-reliance on English textbooks in the classroom (no matter what year level) as I find them restrictive, the teaching of American-English is dominant (I am not American), and misleading as to how English is actually used. I prefer to make my own syllabus" (ALT 2013).

Additionally there are schools or areas which cannot take advantage of all of the technological options (interactive whiteboard) that the Eigo Note/Hi Friends system has to offer. This is an extremely consequential element as more and more instructional materials become technology dependant. At these schools, learners are at an enormous disadvantage if some areas have full use of all learning material while other areas do not. This not only includes the technology itself but also the training of how to use the technology by the instructors. These ALT's commented by stating that ;

"I feel that I don't often use Hi Friends media material during Alt visits. We tend to play more game type activities that an ALT can facilitate (instead of listening to recordings, I can just say things myself.) Sometimes we do use the CD or interactive board and the kids seem to enjoy video portions or games. I think technology in the classroom in Japan is lacking a little, and a lot of classrooms are not easily able to use the technology that comes with Hi Friends" (ALT 2013).

"I've used both text books and find that while hi friends has some great resources on the disk, my tt's lack of comfort with technology and te occasional inability to print things out at work really limits their use. I used the pants off the eigo note picture card sets and really miss having quick access to large, sturdy visuals. Hi friends is also low on activities to practice the target grammar. Home room teachers are breezing through the chapters when I'm not around, but the kids aren't learning much of anything" (2013).

"The computers at the schools are often too old to play the material properly. Updates to the computers are sparse and the people in charge barely capable of understanding technology. Many teachers and ALTs found using the material frustrating due to lag and bugs. Lacking a translation of the material or a teacher to help with the the Japanese makes it hard to properly use the material as outlined in the very much necessary teacher's manual. Some schools lost/misplaced the book and have little idea what to do without it. The content itself often dwells on stereotypes and pushes the agenda of creating as wide a gap as possible between Japanese people and foreigners. "We are all different." Is a good message, but they tend to assume that every country is a unified block linguistically and culturally" (ALT 2013).

"I like the interactive aspects of the Hi Friends CD, but without the use of an interactive white board and letting students play around with it, there's only so much that it's good for. Also, my classes already have enough trouble trying to get a projector and computer set up in time, so sometimes we forgo it" (ALT 2013).

6. Challenges

There have been difficulties in the basic principle of the ALT/JTE team teaching approach (such as language barriers between teachers, tech savvy, teaching philosophies, age differences and others) as ALT respondents have cited. The challenges that lie between the JTEs and ALTs occasionally seem insurmountable. Ohtani (2010) explains; despite the fact that ALTs valued as integral to MEXT's educational reform, many ALTs report that they have been isolated or excluded from lesson planning because of poor communication and a lack of input from Japanese teachers. As the author Pinter (2006, p. 41) points out ;

For the successful introduction of English into primary schools in any one country, the government needs to invest in recruiting and training teachers. This applies to both pre-service and in-service teacher training and opportunities for teacher development. Many countries run well established primary English training courses. However, many countries face a difficult situation with a critical shortage of qualified teachers.

Although the topic of teacher training falls under an entirely different topic than the intended research it is something that is consequential. Without proper and sufficient teacher training for both JTE's and ALT's the subject matter cannot be taught adequately. The emphasis on teacher training should be concentrated on the JTE's. As Pinter (2006, p. 41) continues to illustrate ;

The primary class teacher who delivers the rest of the curriculum and who has a good knowledge of the children as well as the language is in the best position to succeed. Knowledge of the curriculum means that class teachers can integrate English easily into the day. Class teachers know the children and their special needs, such as a safe and encouraging environment, stimulation, fun, and variety as well as plenty of recycling.

7. Conclusion

The Eigo Note and Hi Friends texts have been implemented into the elementary schools course of study. There are slight variations in instructional style between the two texts. Have these lessons unified or divided further EFL education in Japan? Before their introduction, there were sizable differences in EFL education between the Northern and Southern sections of Japan. The comments from some ALTs suggest that these divisions still exist at some level.

Furthermore a link between what is being taught in elementary school English classes and at the Junior High level has yet to be established. As English is an indispensable language for international communication in Asia, it is imperative that Japanese people should be prepared to take full advantage of this common working language so that they can play a more effective role in Asia at large (Honna & Takeshita, 2005). Again numerous comments from ALTs support this disparity. Further research areas could include a similar survey of JTEs and their opinions regarding teacher training and more recently the need for and understanding of technology tools to assist in language learning as we enter a more digitalized age.

The implementation of an EFL text for primary school students has been a long

overdue undertaking. It is not perfect in countless ways as described by the ALT's that use it in their classrooms ; regardless of these faults though it has had an energizing affect on English language teaching in Japan. Prior to this time there was no unity or goal in English language education. Each instructor, each school, district, city, and prefecture was on their own when it came to implementation of language teaching.

This author's experience as an ALT for 20 years can attest to the uncertainty that was wrought when it came to lesson planning. Lessons could differ radically between classes in the same grade. One teacher would do things a certain way while another teacher instructing a class in the same grade at the exact school may want to do things completely different. A class may be flourishing in their English classes while another may be floundering. The positive effect of having one unified teaching system for instructional English language learning cannot be denied. The next step is to work out the difficulties and problems of the text itself. When that is accomplished then Japan can say that all the years, all the money spent on the JET Program and the hiring of Assistant Language Teachers has not been for naught but has been an investment in the future of Japanese citizens. As one ALT commented ;

"A lot of ALTs seem to hate the Eigo Note (hereafter EN) and Hi, Friends (HF) texts. However, the texts are designed with ministry foreign language activities objectives and native Japanese teachers in mind... not native English speakers. If you take their intended purpose as being an aide for native Japanese teachers to be able to comply with the ministry guidelines, the EN and HF texts are fabulous. That said, I find it more useful to take the lesson goals for the chapter and only use the parts of the texts that I think do a good job of fostering those goals" (ALT, 2013).

That is what language learning is all about, establishing goals and attaining them. Utilizing a text is a useful and beneficial way of reaching those goals. There are many obstacles toward complete fulfilment of a exact plan for English language learning in Japanese Elementary schools but the Eigo Note and Hi Friends texts have shown positive results as contributed by the opinions of ALT's working in the schools.

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