Challenges in English Education at School in Japan: Cross-sectional Study of Student Perspectives

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This cross-sectional study examines the challenges of English education in Japanese schools from the students' perspectives, focusing on university students reflecting on their past experiences. This mixed-method study employed both quantitative and qualitative approaches, conducted through an online survey featuring multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The findings highlight key concerns among students, including an overemphasis on standardized testing, insufficient speaking practice, teachers' limited proficiency, a lack of native English-speaking teachers, and dissatisfaction with the curriculum. These results are significant as they reveal the persistent shortcomings in English education in Japan. Despite efforts by MEXT to address these issues theoretically, students report little to no tangible improvements. These insights provide a clearer understanding of the current state of English education in Japan and students' satisfaction level, potentially informing future policy changes and aiding Japan in improving its global ranking in English proficiency.

Introduction

English education in Japan faces various challenges that hinder the successful development of a high level of English proficiency. Numerous reforms have been implemented by the Ministry of Education such as a focus on communication, such as earlier introduction of English in the curriculum and hiring of native teachers (Takeshita, 2010). However, English proficiency keeps declining (Figure 1). It is currently ranked 87th out of 113 countries, scoring only "low proficiency" on the EF English Proficiency Index (*Japan | EF English Proficiency Index | EF Global Site (English)*, n.d.).

Figure 1
Japan's EF English Proficiency Index Ranking

This graph shows the rapid decline of Japan's English proficiency from 2011 until 2022.
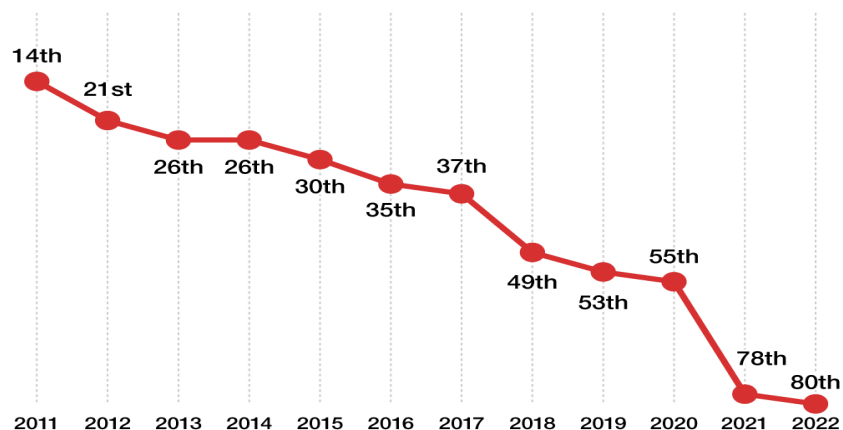
Created by *Nippon.com* based on data from the EF English Proficiency Index.

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Note. Japan's EF English Proficiency Index Ranking *(Japan's English Proficiency Falls Further Among Non-English-Speaking Countries in 2022, 2023)*

There is a multitude of reasons for this drop in quality. First, the popular *yakudoku* method still remains prominent, prioritizing rote memorization of grammar over practical language use in real life. The immense pressure of university entrance exams puts high stress on students, and teachers to emphasize rote memorizing to increase their chances of entering university, leading to significant mental health concerns. Furthermore, the prevalent teacher-centered teaching style hinders students from actively engaging in class and gaining speaking competence. Cultural factors, such as shyness and an overconcern about makes mistakes also hinder them from actively participating in class. Additionally, among some older generations, there is a perception that English threatens the Japanese language and culture, making it difficult to integrate English education. Addressing these challenges is crucial for improving the way English is taught at Japanese schools in order to enable Japanese students to compete on a global level. This study underlines the need for further comprehensive educational reforms to provide effective English language teaching in Japan.

The declining quality of English education in Japan is reflected in the educational choices made by parents, with many citing it as the primary factor behind the growing trend of homeschooling (Nakanishi, 2023). Additionally, this dissatisfaction has contributed to the increasing popularity of international schools, despite their high tuition fees (Yamashita, 2022). Furthermore, the number of Japanese students participating in overseas exchange programs has increased more than tenfold over the past two decades, except for a decline during the COVID-19 pandemic due to travel restrictions (Miura, 2022). This underscores parental dissatisfaction and suggests that parents are seeking alternatives to the traditional education system to improve their children's English proficiency.

Figure 2
Schools Transition to International Baccalaureat

This graph shows the rapid increase of schools transitioning to the international Baccalaureat from 2013 until 2021.
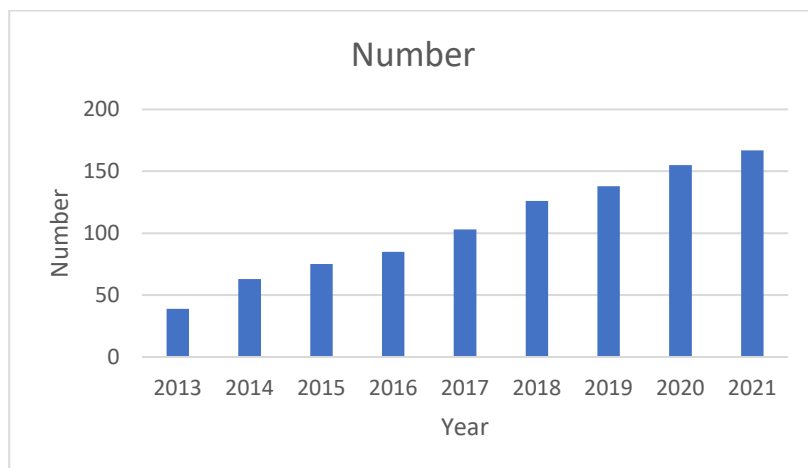
Note. Graph created based on data from Yamashita (2022).

Literature Review

Yakudoku
First, a major challenge in English education in Japan is the continued dependence on the traditional yakudoku method. According to Hino, (1988:46), yakudoku is "...a technique or a

mental process for reading a foreign language in which the target language sentence is first translated word by word, and the resulting translation reordered to match Japanese word order as part of the process of reading comprehension". This method emphasizes grammar-focused instruction and purely rote memorization (Cook, 2012; Hata, 2015; Jones, 2019; Kobayashi, 2011). This approach remains prevalent due to its effectiveness in preparing students for grammar-heavy university entrance exams, although adjustments have been made to reduce these. This method prioritizes reading comprehension and grammatical accuracy over communicative proficiency, therefore limiting students' ability to use English in real-world contexts. Additionally, the deep-rooted institutional expectations compel teachers to stick to traditional methods, hindering the adoption of more innovative and communicative language teaching approaches. The focus on rote memorization further worsens the problem, as students are trained to recall information rather than develop practical language skills. Therefore, these rote memorization and translation practices impose a big obstacle to developing practical English skills. According to Hino (1988), this method "limits the speed at which the student reads, induces fatigue, and reduces the efficiency with which s/he is able to comprehend." Further, it also has a bad effect on the other language skills of listening, speaking, and writing. Japanese students have a tendency to translate word-by-word when listening to spoken English, which results in them only understanding what is spoken very slowly. The students find comprehension a "tiring, imprecise, and ineffective process". This strategy limits the students' chances of understanding the text fully.

Teacher-centered Style

Another issue is the outdated teacher-centered English teaching in Japan (Hosoki, 2011; Matsuyama et al., 2019; Yoshida, 2001). The traditional teaching style in Japan is heavily teacher-centered and mainly involves lecture-style instruction, which is considered less effective for promoting English communication skills. This teaching

style has been subject to criticism due to its negative implications on student engagement, language acquisition, and overall learning outcomes. This traditional approach prioritizes the transmission of knowledge from teacher to student, with minimal emphasis on student active participation, critical thinking, or authentic language use in practical situations. As a result, students struggle to develop communicative competence and confidence in using English outside the classroom. Despite efforts to introduce more communicative and student-centered approaches, the dominance of teacher-centered methods persists due to factors like teacher training practices and exam-focused curricula. Therefore, many students face challenges in effectively communicating in English. To address these issues, there is a growing recognition of the need to reform the teaching style, emphasizing more interactive, communicative approaches that empower students to actively engage in class. Willis (1993: 91-92), argues that in a typical University class in Japan, the student has no personal involvement, nor is he required to respond in any way. In fact, silence is considered a sign of respect toward the teacher (Kato, 2010). The part where students develop a feeling for language, or responding to texts or questions is missing. It is important to actively involve the students because students prefer interactive learning while the lecture style is not as popular (Taat et al., 2020). Therefore, it is necessary to provide opportunities for students to interact with the teacher, with the text, and peers with each other.

Teachers' Self-efficacy

Another factor is the English teacher's self-efficacy belief, which influences their confidence in applying communicative language teaching (Thompson, 2016; Thompson, 2020; Yada, 2019). They claim that teachers with experiences such as studying abroad or participating in CLT during their own education tend to have stronger self-efficacy beliefs than other teachers. Additional factors, including the academic ranking of schools and the age composition of teaching teams, also significantly affect these beliefs. The

research underscores the importance of adapting teacher efficacy models to specific cultural contexts, emphasizing that supportive leadership and positive social feedback are crucial for boosting teachers' self-efficacy. These findings provide valuable insights into enhancing English education in Japan by addressing the factors that influence teachers' confidence and effectiveness in the classroom. The schools need to focus on empowering their teachers to adopt more innovative and effective teaching practices, which will increase student engagement and ultimately result in more successful English learning. Additionally, embracing lifelong learning benefits not only teachers but also students significantly, as highlighted by Nakanishi (2022). By committing to continuous learning throughout their career, teachers can set a powerful example for their students, inspiring them on their lifelong learning journeys in the future. In this context, the United States is a pioneer with 38.2% of nontraditional adult learners in postsecondary education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009).

Anxiety and Stress

Stress is a big factor in general for students (Kondo 2004; Koyama et al., 2014; Ohata, 2005; Paxton et al., 2022). While not necessarily directly, this stress also indirectly influences the English language acquisition of the students. Stress and mental health are significant factors affecting students' language learning abilities. Ohata (2005) found that major factors are fear of negative evaluation/losing face in front of others, lack of self-confidence, competitiveness, and exam anxiety. High levels of stress, and expectations, can hinder cognitive functions essential for language acquisition, such as memory, concentration, and motivation: Students experiencing stress and mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, are more likely to struggle with learning a new language. The impact of stress extends beyond physical health, affecting social and emotional well-being, which is crucial for creating a positive learning environment. As seen in Figure 3, this high level of stress is reflected in the annual spike in suicide rates,

particularly around the return to school after the summer holiday in September, highlighting the significant pressure that schools can impose (Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Suicide Countermeasures Promotion Office & National Police Agency Community Safety Bureau Community Safety Planning Division, 2024). Regarding daily learning, a high stress level can lead to decreased classroom participation, reduced interaction with peers, and a lack of confidence in using the language, all of which are crucial to gaining language proficiency. Therefore, addressing stress and promoting mental health are essential for enhancing students' ability to learn English effectively. Creating a supportive and less pressurized educational environment can help mitigate these issues, fostering a more conducive atmosphere for language learning.

Figure 3
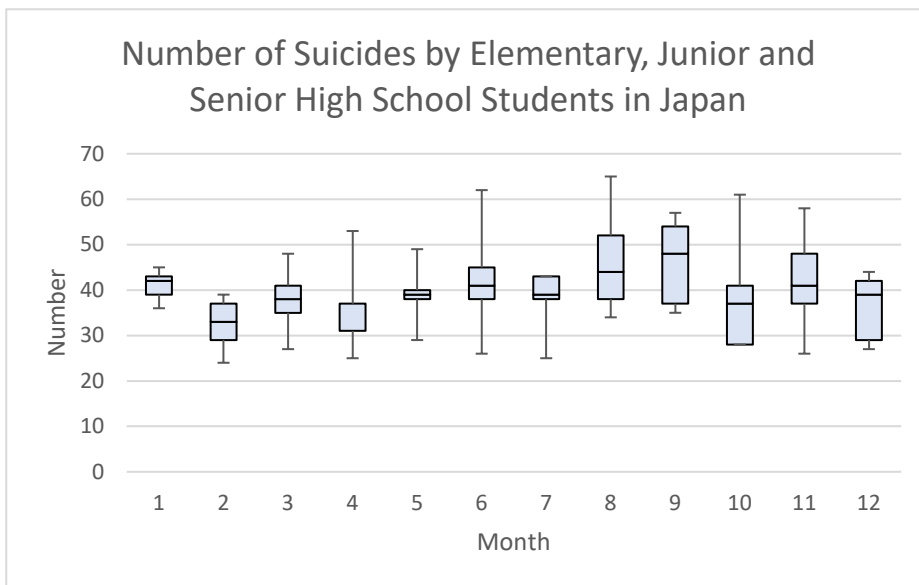
Note. Suicides between 2019 and 2023, monthly separated. Graph created based on data from the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Suicide Countermeasures Promotion Office & National Police Agency Community Safety Bureau Community Safety Planning Division

Cultural Traits

Shyness presents a significant cultural challenge in the Japanese EFL classroom, affecting students' ability to actively participate in class and particularly to engage in spoken language activities (Cutrone, 2009; Doyon, 2000; Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000; King et al., 2020; Krashen, 1998; Sakuragi, 2004). Despite the recognized importance of communication in language learning, many students are nervous about speaking out during conversation classes, hindering them from improving their oral language skills. This reluctance shows in various ways, including a lack of initiative in starting and participating in discussions, avoidance of new topics they are not familiar with yet, minimal interaction with the instructor, lack of questions, and hesitation to volunteer answers. Such behavior has its origin in deeply rooted cultural and educational factors. Traditionally, Japanese classrooms prioritize a lecture-style format, where teachers pass on knowledge while students passively receive it. This model promotes a belief that the classroom is a space for quiet listening rather than active participation. Moreover, societal norms such as obedience to authority, and fear of making mistakes increase feelings of shyness among students. This outdated structure of one-way information flow from teacher to student generates passivity and hinders students from practicing their oral English skills. Therefore, addressing shyness in English education requires a complex approach that considers cultural, educational, and societal influences, aiming to create a comfortable and safe class environment that encourages student confidence and active participation in English language learning.

Methodology

Setting and Participants

31 students were recruited as participants from Aoyama Gakuin University. A key reason for doing so was convenience and trust from the students to the author, which may therefore lead

participants to be more open to participating in the research and write openly about their concerns. All participants received an initial cover sheet, introducing the researcher and the research purpose. Furthermore, a consent sheet was sent out, confirming their voluntary participation. This was signed digitally via the survey form online.

Data Collection

A brief online survey was conducted via the survey platform *SurveyMonkey*. This platform has proven the be reliable in previous research use. The collection of answers lasted from January to March 2024. The participants took an average of three minutes to answer the survey. The survey was purposely set concisely so that the students do not lose interest. None of the questions were compulsory.

Data Analysis

The researcher used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Descriptive statistics were applied to summarize the data. Data from the multiple-choice questions were displayed in a bar graph for clearer visualization. Responses from the open-ended comment section were coded and categorized based on thematic content. This allowed the researcher to gain a comprehensive understanding of both numerical trends and deeper insights from participant responses.
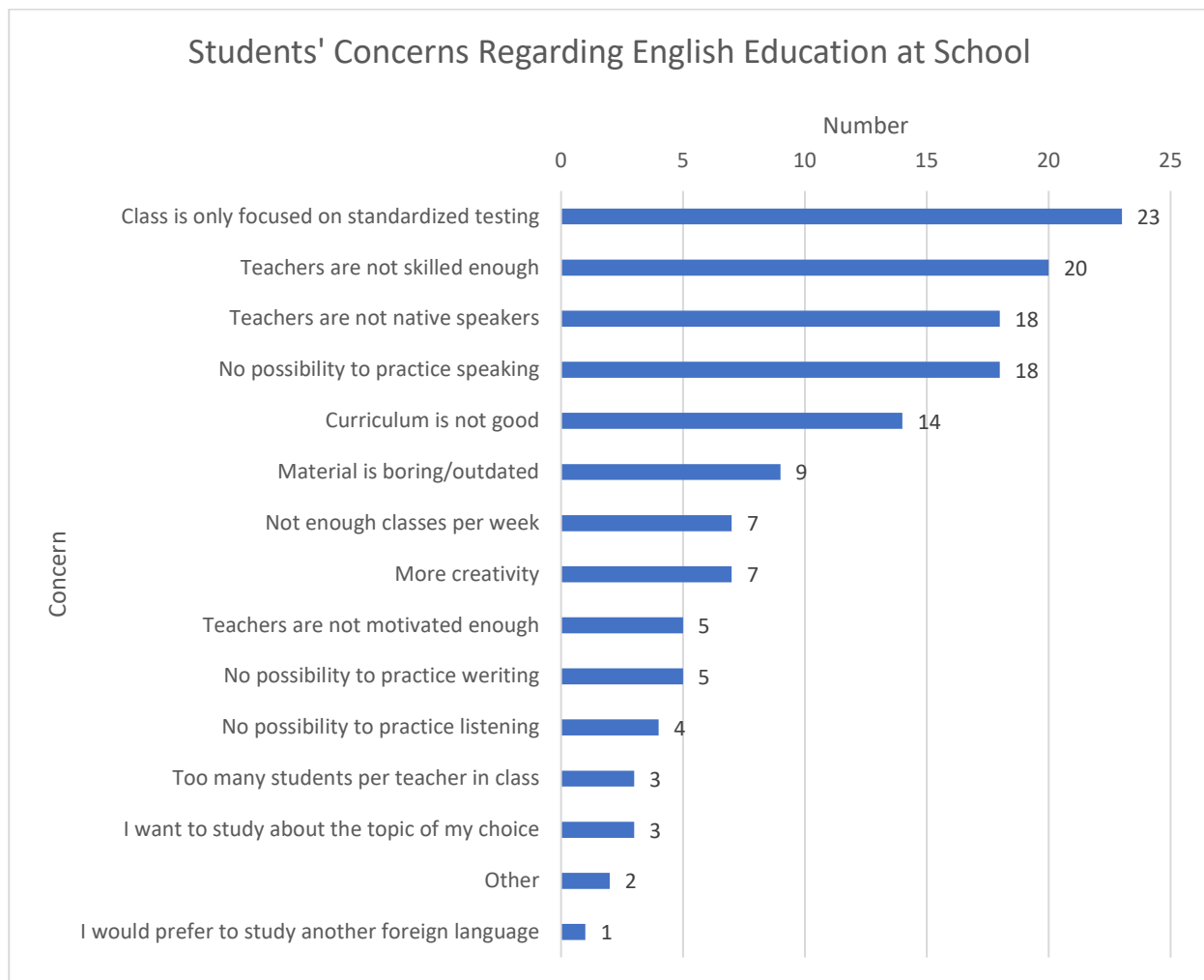
Trustworthiness

Although the close relationship between the author and the participants helped facilitate this study, this insider's perspective may introduce some subjectivity and perhaps further influence the data analysis. Ethics and risks are important issues in conducting qualitative research. In this study, the students voluntarily

participated and were all informed about the study's purpose and the researchers' identities.

Results

Figure 4
Students' Concerns Regarding English Education at School in Retrospect

Students' Concerns Regarding English Education at School

Concern	Number
Class is only focused on standardized testing	23
Teachers are not skilled enough	20
Teachers are not native speakers	18
No possibility to practice speaking	18
Curriculum is not good	14
Material is boring/outdated	9
Not enough classes per week	7
More creativity	7
Teachers are not motivated enough	5
No possibility to practice weriting	5
No possibility to practice listening	4
Too many students per teacher in class	3
I want to study about the topic of my choice	3
Other	2
I would prefer to study another foreign language	1

Note. Multiple responses were allowed for the multiple-choice questions.

This graph illustrates university students' retrospective concerns regarding their English classes in school. The most prominent issue, reported by 74% of respondents, is a strong dislike for standardized testing. Additionally, 65% of students expressed dissatisfaction with teachers' skill levels. Two concerns were equally

cited by 58% of students: the lack of native-speaking teachers and insufficient opportunities for practicing speaking. Further, 45% of the respondents indicated that the curriculum was inadequate.

Table1
Open-ended Comments

Code	Theme	Definition	Example Sentence Excerpt	Number of occurrences
SP	Speaking	Concerns regarding speaking practice	My junior high school had English conversation class once a week, which was not enough for me to practice speaking	7
TE	Teacher	Concerns regarding the teacher's English skills	the teachers' English level is too bad.	2
CR	Creativity	Concerns regarding the curriculum's creativity	I want the English education more creative, (..)	1

Note. The sample sentences in the table represent actual responses from the participants' open-ended answers.

This table presents the students' responses to open-ended questions, with the most common comments focusing on speaking and communication.

Discussion

The findings show that the majority of students disapprove of the excessive focus on standardized testing. Although MEXT has continuously made adjustments to move away from standardized methods, such as yakudoku and teacher-centered instruction, in favor of more creative approaches, this shift does not seem to have

reached classrooms yet, according to the students (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, n.d.).

Additionally, particularly in the open-ended section, most students expressed a desire for more speaking practice during class, as well as extracurricular opportunities for speaking practice. This suggests that while MEXT has, on paper, implemented more speaking-focused lessons, the students do not perceive this change. Furthermore, although previous research suggests that students are often too shy to speak, the findings of this study indicate that they actively want more opportunities for speaking practice (Cutrone, 2009; Doyon, 2000; Hinenoya & Gatbonton, 2000; King et al., 2020; Krashen, 1998; Sakuragi, 2004).

Students also expressed mistrust in their teachers, either due to a perceived lack of skills or because the teachers were not native speakers. This aligns with previous research showing that teachers themselves often lack confidence in their teaching and speaking abilities (Thompson, 2016; Thompson, 2020; Yada, 2019). Government-funded or university-provided courses for teachers to develop their skills could be beneficial. Both teachers and students would benefit from this. Further, it may be beneficial to address these concerns by demonstrating that non-native English-speaking teachers can be highly qualified to teach the language and at the same time work toward dismantling cultural biases regarding non-native second language teachers (Llurda & Calvet-Terré, 2022). Further, the students disapprove of the curriculum, citing issues such as the fixation on standardized testing, lack of speaking practice, teachers' skills, and the absence of native teachers. They also find the curriculum not creative enough. Again, the persistence of teacher-centered instruction and yakudoku may be a reason for that. More innovative teaching methods, along with real-life situations or assignments, could engage students and encourage more active participation.

Limitations and Future Research

The number of participants is relatively low. Future research should include a larger sample size to obtain more precise survey results and greater variety in responses to the open-ended questions. Additionally, the participants are no longer school students, so their views may have shifted since graduating. It may further be useful to ask students in more detail how they would like their curriculum to be structured.

Suggestions

The author here gives a few suggestions for teachers on how to improve EFL learning in Japan.

1. Shift from yakudoku to holistic learning
   It is necessary to further shift away towards a more holistic approach to learning. The teacher's job is to motivate the students (Kong, 2009). They should focus on fostering a love for learning, making them enjoy English, get them involved. The students need personal interaction and experience in class (Sert, 2019). Student engagement is crucial in language learning.
2. More group work to increase speaking practice
   Group work can help the students to explore speaking freely and learn from each other (Alfares, 2017). Instead of passively listening, they can actively participate in the discussion and take risks within the supportive environment of the peer group. By using group work, the teacher can create a less intimidating environment for students to flourish. This practice gradually helps to reduce their shyness in using English. Additionally, this time-effective approach gives teachers the possibility to create more speaking opportunities for the students.
3. Authentic and interesting learning materials
   Teachers should use authentic materials in class that relate to students' lives and interests (Namaziandost et al., 2022). The impact of authentic materials on reading comprehension,

motivation, and anxiety among Iranian male EFL learners. Reading & Writing Quarterly, 38(1), 1-18.). This expands the students' interest and makes them more eager to learn. Real-life situations enable students to apply their English skills in practical contexts. These positive success experiences further boost their confidence.

4. Balance between practical skills and standardized exams
While the Ministry of Education has been pushing oral communication, the reality of the big emphasis on outdated memorization for entrance examinations remains due to its crucial importance (MacWhinnie & Mitchell, 2017). Therefore, teachers must act as mediators between the parents' and the school's high expectations for the entrance examinations and their and their students' wish for more communication and practice (O'Donnell, 2005). While preparing them for the inevitable exams, they should try to give them real-life applicable English for later as well. This might be a difficult balancing act.

5. Overseas training for teachers
As reported, the teachers' self-efficacy and the students' trust in the teacher are lacking. This can be improved by overseas training courses tailored to individual needs. According to Kurihara & Samimy (2007), such training has positive effects, including increased confidence, improvements in teaching beliefs and practices, and enhanced ability to teach English. Ultimately, students will benefit from this. Therefore, teacher training should be implemented more frequently and incorporate international practices.

Conclusion

This study reveals that students' major concerns include the emphasis on standardized testing, lack of speaking practice, inadequate teachers' skills, native teachers, and dissatisfaction with the curriculum. These findings highlight significant shortcomings in English education in Japan. Despite MEXT's efforts to address

these issues theoretically, students report no tangible improvements. These insights offer a clearer understanding of the current situation in Japan and students' satisfaction levels with their education. They may inform future policy adjustments and help improve Japan's globally low position in English proficiency rankings.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix 1

Concern	Votes n	Votes %
Class is only focused on standardized testing	23	74%
Teachers are not skilled enough	20	65%
Teachers are not native speakers	18	58%
No possibility to practice speaking	18	58%
Curriculum is not good	14	45%
Material is boring/outdated	9	29%
Not enough classes per week	7	23%
More creativity	7	23%
Teachers are not motivated enough	5	16%
No possibility to practice weriting	5	16%
No possibility to practice listening	4	13%
Too many students per teacher in class	3	10%
I want to study about the topic of my choice	3	10%
Other	2	6%
I would prefer to study another foreign language	1	3%
Total	31	100%