Problems and Opportunities in the MEXT Course of Study: A Response from a Teacher-Training Perspective

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Introduction

Ever since the introduction of English into the school curriculum in 1947, the Japanese Ministry of Education has been making periodic changes to the Course of Study in an attempt to improve the English abilities of the Japanese people as a whole. Some of these have been quite drastic, such as the introduction of native speaking assistant language teachers in 1987, or the addition of foreign language (that is, English) activities into elementary school. More changes are being anticipated to prepare for the Olympics in 2020, including more frequent English classes which start earlier in the curriculum. One of the changes that has garnered the most attention recently is the stipulation that English classes in high schools be taught in English, and in junior high schools that they be taught "in principle" in English. Despite these changes, grammar-based English teaching seems entrenched in Japan. While reasons and solutions are complex, teacher training programs can play a part in making curricular changes more successful in achieving their goal, and MEXT can support this.

This paper will discuss possible reasons for the disjunct between the goals of the Course of Study and the reality of the classroom. The entrance examination for university is one of the most frequently-cited reasons, and while it undeniably has an

impact on curriculum, the question of how to correct the problem is not so clear cut. Another source of discord could be that goals of practitioners differ from the macro-level goals that MEXT holds for English language education. Class size and other specific factors may have an influence as well. There is also the question of the feasibility and advisability of MEXT's goals. If the goals are impossible to meet this will have a negative effect on teachers, administrators, and students. It is necessary also to take a critical look at MEXT's English in English policy. Next, some suggestions for a response from teacher trainers will be suggested.

Communication in English became one of the goals of the Course of Study in 1989. Two years earlier MEXT had taken the enormous and rather expensive step of beginning the JET program, which brought young English native-speakers to Japan to teach in junior and senior high schools. Successive revisions to the Course of Study have reiterated the importance of changing the older, grammar-based curriculum to one which is designed to help students to eventually communicate in English. In 2003, the Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English abilities was formulated, which introduced English in elementary schools and established the Special English Language High [SELHI} Schools. The Action Plan also specifically mentions that English will be the medium of instruction and that teachers are expected to have sufficient English to teach in it. Despite the fact that communication has been mentioned in the Course of Study for such a long time, the best evidence suggests that grammar-based pedagogy remains the norm in classrooms. Gorsuch (1998) found yakudoku to be one of the main activities of the classroom. Yakudoku refers to the process of word-for-word translation of English into Japanese, followed by successive restating to conform more

closely with Japanese syntax (Hino, 1988, in Gorsuch, 1998, p.8□. She found that this leads to an over-reliance on Japanese as a language of instruction, as well as the class being basically teacher-fronted. Teachers in Gorsuch's study cited the entrance examination among reasons that they used this technique, although she points out that translation is not a skill measured on it (p. 27). More recent research shows little change. Sakui (2011) found that most classroom time was still spent on teacher-fronted activities such as grammar explanation and chorus reading. Nishino (2011) came to a similar conclusion.

Influence of the Entrance Examination

Many reasons are given for yakudoku and other grammar-based methods remaining so persistently in the face of repeated efforts at reform by MEXT. One of the most commonly-cited reasons is the entrance examination (Browne and Yamashita, 1995, Kikuchi, 2006; O'Donnell, 2005, Stewart, 2011, Saito, 2016). This was particularly true throughout the years when there was strong competition among students for places in a university, but it remains so today when circumstances have changed a great deal. Economic reasons may be part of the reason that the examinations remain so influential. Stewart (2011) remarks that ". . .institutional testing is a cash cow that must be milked. There is a huge testing industry in Japan that depends on the continuation of "examination hell" even now with more places in universities than applicants" (p.11).

However, the question of how and to what extent the entrance exam affects the adoption of CLT is more complex than it appears at first. It has for a long time been the

case that high school English classes alone were not sufficient to allow the student to pass the entrance examination. Brown and Yamashita (1995) found that the tests did not appear to be designed to measure only reading skills as covered in the normal high school curriculum. They come to the conclusion that it is more a measure of testwise-ness than language skills. Brown and Yamashita were writing at a time when the competition to be admitted to university was quite fierce, but similar results were found more recently (Kikuchi 2006), when some universities will admit any high school graduate. This means that passing the examinations still require some sort of extracurricular instruction beyond regular high school classes, and perhaps that what is being tested is not even English, per se. Guest (2008) in his comparison of the Center Test in 1981 and 2006, is much more positive about changes that have been made. Guest found that the later test is much improved, using a wide variety of tasks and putting greater weight on higher-order thinking skills. He concludes that any effect it has on the curriculum (the "washback effect") should be positive.

Both accounts show that there is no simple correspondence between the high school curriculum, or the way that high school teachers prefer to teach, and examinations which students may have to take. Although Brown and Yamashita (1995) and Kikuchi (2006) have a generally negative view of the entrance examination, and Guest's (2008) is generally more positive, the results show that teachers are either unable to adequately prepare students or that the expected washback from the improved university entrance examinations and Center Test has not materialized, and teachers are still teaching to a previous iteration of the test. Other research has shown, however, that even in schools where the majority of students do not intend to go on to university,

and thus do not need to pass entrance examinations, teachers avoid using CLT and prefer to teach a grammar-based syllabus (O'Donnell, 2005). Therefore, simply improving the entrance examinations may not have the directly positive effect that MEXT desires.

Differing Goals

There is also the fact that the goals of MEXT may differ significantly from goals at the local level. Teachers have to answer to other stakeholders: students, parents, and administration, more directly than they do to MEXT. This can affect the extent to which teachers and administrators "buy in" to the MEXT plan and take efforts to implement it. Barrett and Miyashita (2016) point out that the language of the Course of Study (in English translation) is designed to paint the new policies in a positive light, as it depends on schools and teachers to carry them. However, MEXT and schools may not be working for the same purpose. MEXT's policies follow the Abe administration's neoliberal goals at the macro-level, but local goals for schools and teachers might include fostering students' personal development (p.50). Kubota (2011 a & B) points out that the goals of the Course of Study include meeting the needs of corporate Japan for English speakers, as well as enabling individual Japanese people to improve their circumstances through their English skill. However, she finds that the goals of students of English (at an eikaiwa school) may be things such as personal growth or establishing an identity. In addition, the reality of the need for English in corporations may not be as great as is assumed. Kubota found that in the manufacturing industry in a medium-sized city in which she did research, only around 9.5% of the employees were estimated to use English regularly. In addition, her survey of Hello Work job

listings found only 1.4% of the listings for Tokyo required English. English may not be the key to success as it is portrayed either. Kubota found that gender and other factors may have more bearing on economic success of individual students (2011a). Teachers' and students' awareness of local realities and their differing goals may have a significant effect on the realization of curricular in individual school.

The Teaching Context

Aspects of individual teaching contexts can also influence the way that teachers teach. Student proficiency (Gorsuch 1998) or simply student preference (O'Donnell 2005) can affect a teacher's choice of whether to use teacher-fronted or more communicative methods, and whether English or Japanese should be used a medium for instruction. The large size of Japanese classes were also cited as a factor (O'Donnell 2005). A smaller class size is one of the tenets of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). More importantly, many teacher training publications as well as professional journals and other materials seem to take as a given that the size of the class will be smaller. This means that activities explained in such materials may not be feasible as written. The heavy burden of teacher administrative work (O'Donnell 2005) has also been mentioned. Without the time to explore a new way of teaching, it may be easiest for teachers to simply fall back on what they know.

Teacher training

The adequacy of teacher training to prepare teachers for a communicative curriculum has also been called into question. Gorsuch (1998) believes this a primary problem with implementing CLT. Kizuka (1997), Browne and Wada (1998) and

Kikuchi and Browne (2009) echo these sentiments. Browne and Wada found that most of the teachers they surveyed had majored in literature rather than linguistics. That those who majored in literature were dissatisfied with their preparation for a classroom is not surprising. However, even those who majored in linguistics believed that they were not adequately prepared, as the classes had focused more on historical linguistics. Although this study is almost twenty years old, we might expect that some of the teachers surveyed are still in the work force. Kikuchi and Browne, referring to Bailey et. al. (1996) point out that "in the absence of good pre-service training, teachers tend to fall back on how they themselves were taught in school as a student, a phenomena [sic] known as 'the apprenticeship of teaching'. It is possible that the severe lack of teacher training in Japan is a contributing factor to the lasting impact of the grammar translation method since grammar-translation is how most teachers learned English when they were students, their 'apprenticeship of teaching.'" (p. 175). Although it has been found that teachers do understand what CLT is according to MEXT (Sakui 2011, page 159) they may not be able to translate this knowledge into practice. Particularly, Sakui found, balancing grammar instruction with communicative activities was troublesome for these teachers, and frequently left them simply doing teacher-fronted grammar for most of the class. Another problem may be the English level of teachers. In 2006 MEXT found that only 50% of high school English teachers had attained its goal of a 550 TOEFL score (MEXT 2006 in Nishino and Watanabe 2008).

Feasibility of goals

It has been suggested that the goals of MEXT are unfeasible, which would have

an effect on how the curriculum is implemented. Hato, writing about the 2003 Action Plan, points out that it is not certain if MEXT's communication goals are actually achievable in the time allotted. Second language acquisition research is not clear on the number of classroom hours required for students to achieve certain levels of competence in communicating in English, and such work as has been done does not deal with such a large language distance as there is between Japanese and English (2005). Stewart (2011) believes that the goals of the 2008 Course of Study call for skills that the students may not even have in Japanese, such as exchanging arguments or considering different points of view in order to make a decision. Hato feels that "[f]or teachers who are pressured by time constraints regarding the highly ambitious goals to be achieved, it is not easy to take time away from [form-focused instruction], through which they can easily obtain immediate tangible outcomes, and allocate the time to classroom interaction that has no explicit target knowledge to be learned and hence no instantaneous perceivable effects" (2005, p. 45). Hato also questions MEXTs advocacy of the Eiken and other similar tests as a way of measuring students' proficiency, as these do not test communication skills. It has also been pointed out that use of the Eiken, which is closely tied to the MEXT curriculum, defines English as a school subject rather than something to be used for communication (Hashimoto 2009). Although MEXT (2003) stipulates that tests of communicative ability should be used, Hato points out that this is a very difficult thing to measure, particularly on a large scale.

English as a Language of Instruction

Another large question concerns one of the main points of the 2008 Course of Study, which is the use of English as a language of instruction. Although English as a

language of instruction has been accepted in the west as the optimal way to conduct a class, this is probably due to factors other than research evidence. Using English to teach English is frequently linked with CLT, as it is in the Course of Study, but an English-only class does not appear in the seminal literature of CLT, either positively or negatively (Cook, 2001). CLT does hold that input in the target language is of paramount importance, but this does not preclude using the first language (L1). Forbidding the use of the L1 in the classroom is associated more with older methods, such as the Direct Methods and Audio-Lingual Method.

In fact, in the U.S., historically the English-only approach to classroom instruction has fluctuated in popularity in accordance with political changes, not changes in pedagogy (Auerbach, 1993). Phillipson (1992) claims that on a world-wide scale the trend towards English-only instruction is connected with neocolonialism. Among the principles that arose in the 1950s and 1960s are English taught monolingually, by native speakers. This establishes the Anglo-Saxon countries (the "Inner Circle" Kachru, 1992) as the owners of English who control how it is disseminated to developing countries.

While English-only instruction as a matter of policy depends more on politics, there are some pedagogical benefits to increasing the amount of input in the classroom, which English as a language of instruction necessarily does. Ellis (1994) believes that access to "rich" input is a necessary condition of high-level English kills. However, use of the L1 has undeniable benefits which are lost when an English-only policy is enforced. The first is its use in scaffolding, either by the teacher or by a fellow student.

Scaffolding, in Vygotskyan theory, provides support for a learner until he or she reaches a level where she can perform the task independently. L1 use has also been found to be helpful in classroom management, as it alerts the students to the authenticity of the message. "Saying 'shut up or you will get a detention' in the L1 is a serious threat rather than practice of the imperative and conditional constructions" (Cook, 2001, p. 195). It is helpful for affective reasons, to make students feel comfortable and individually recognized. Some teachers in tertiary contexts with English-only policies feel positively about L1 use in the language classroom, for such reasons as efficient time use, rapport-building, and for helping students whose proficiency is low. Some teachers in the same context, however, felt that the L1 should not be used, citing the monolingual context outside of the classroom, and perceived student preference for an English-only classroom. (McMillan and Rivers, 2011).

These benefits are becoming more widely recognized and it seems to many observers that Japan is behind the curve in terms of modernizing English instruction. It may be that Japan is following the rest of Asia [Nunan, 2003], particularly Korea, which adopted English only instruction for all secondary education in 2004. It would be well to remember that Korea is having similar problems to Japan, with teachers feeling that English as a medium of instruction was impossible to implement due to students low proficiency, large class size, and the importance of English entrance exams (Jeon 2008).

Response of Teacher Education

Language teacher education in Japan has been criticized for being too theoretical, with a very brief term of practice teaching which does not allow the trainees to apply what they have learned (Kizuka, 2006). While teachers may have a theoretical grasp of the tenets ofCLT (Sakui, 2011), they may still have difficulty applying it in their local contexts, with added difficulties such as large classes, differing abilities in a single class, and the necessity of teaching grammar along with communication. Several things are required to help teachers deal with these: more clarity from MEXT, more focused pre-service training, and in-service training that is easier for teachers to obtain.

Hato (2005) shows that MEXT does not define CLT in the Course of Study or in related documents. This may be positive, as it allows schools and teachers to interpret it in a way that best fits their particular school or classroom. In fact, in some ways the Action Plan gave schools more freedom, as it no longer specifies goals for each grade level (Butler and Iino 2005). However, this leaves teachers without a clear way forward in deciding questions such as how much English or how much grammar to use in class. The English-in-English policy, for example, can leave teachers feeling guilty about their Japanese use (Hawkins 2015), although MEXT has informally acknowledged that some Japanese is condoned; for brief grammar explanation before a communicative lesson, for example (Tahira 2012). Similarly, MEXT-approved textbooks are grammar-focused while the curriculum explicitly focuses on communication (Glasgow and Paller, 2016). Another issue concerns the entrance examinations. Government-sponsored schools have now begun to include listening on their entrance examinations and TOEIC and TOEFL scores are now allowed to be submitted for admission. This indicates that MEXT is

attempting to use the entrance examination to effect positive washback, which is a valuable development. However, it may not be enough. Guest's (2008)examination of the Center Test suggests that the washback effect of previous changes would be positive, but there does not seem to have been any attendant washback. Washback alone has been found not to be sufficient to cause real pedagogical change (Anderson & Wall, 1993, in Hato 2005). Test changes need to be disseminated through teacher education. While freedom to shape CLT to fit local contexts is a positive thing, there are still mixed messages in the MEXT policy when taken as a whole.

Teacher education needs to provide teachers with the tools to adapt CLT to the challenges of their teaching context. One of these is large class sizes (Steele and Zhang, 2016). A large class causes various problems for the implementation of communicative teaching in terms of classroom management, assessment, and teacher workload. More seriously, as mentioned before, development of tasks can be challenging as most of the standard tasks for CLT are designed for smaller classes and are difficult to control in a larger class (Howard, 2008). Applying CLT techniques to a large class takes both experience and imagination. For this reason, CLT as it is taught in Western graduate schools may not be effective when attempted in Japan. Teacher training programs need to focus on how CLT can be applied in large classrooms, using, for example, the Teaching English in Large Classes Research and Development Network (TELC-net) for resources.

Another concern is maximizing the use of English while still using the L1 as a resource. As discussed above, teachers may tend to just have a vague idea that it is

best to use English as much as possible, but teacher training can include information so that teachers can use Japanese more purposefully. “Optimal first language use in communicative and immersion second and foreign language classrooms recognizes the benefits of the learner’s first language as a cognitive and meta-cognitive tool, as a strategic organizer, and as a scaffold for language development. In addition, the first language helps learners navigate a bilingual identify and thereby learn to function as a bilingual” (Turnbull & Daily-O’Cain, p. 183). Cook (2001) posits several factors to be examined when determining optimal use of the L1 in a foreign language classroom, such as efficiency, enhanced learning, and external relevance. The last refers to skills using both languages which may help the student in the real world, such as interpretation, for example. Students can be taught to evaluate various classroom situations to make rational judgments about which language to use.

While the English level of prospective teachers is obviously a concern, English used in the classroom is a particular genre (Mondejar, et.al, 2001; Freeman et. al., 2015; Cook, 2001; and, e.g. Sinclair and Coulthard 1975) and may not be adequately tested by a general proficiency test. Mondejar and colleagues suggest using benchmarks that specifically target skills such as giving instructions. A general course of English for English teaching (Freeman et. al., 2015) has been developed and it is hoped that this will lead to a wide range of teaching materials, including ones specifically targeted to the Japanese context.

MEXT has recently mandated in-service training session and re-certification, which could also be a a positive step if it is designed to respond to local demands.

Mondejar et.al., (2011) for example, suggest the creation of communities of practice for in-service teachers. This is something that has been created by teachers at a local level on their own initiative (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008). This would be much more effective if it were accompanied by a reduction in teacher workload, cited b as one of the reasons for difficulties in adopting CLT (O'Donnell, 2005; Sakui 2011). It has also been mentioned as a concern related to the teacher certification system implemented in 2009 (Jimbo, Hisamura, and Yoffe, 2007). Teachers have already begun to resist the obligation to supervise club activities, which is not stipulated in Monkasho but may be enforced by social pressure in individual schools. (Osaki, 2016). It is hoped that this will be followed be a serious re-evaluation of how teachers should be spending their work time.

Thus far, MEXT's many changes in policy cannot be considered to be a success, although the continuing drive to improve and modernize its educational system is a largely positive thing. Teacher trainers can target their instruction to help their students to deal with curricular changes in the best way for their own students. Trainers have the advantage of understanding local realities so that they can help trainees to apply communicative language teaching and English-only instruction to deal with these. Trainees can be given the tools to deal with a variety of situations in a way that benefits students best.

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