

Reforms in English Language Education in Japanese Secondary Schools:
Impacts and Issues

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日本における学校英語教育改革：その影響と現状の課題

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桜美林論考『言語文化研究』第9号 2018年3月

The Journal of J. F. Oberlin University

Studies in Language and Culture, The Ninth Issue, March 2018

Keywords: educational reform, teacher development

Abstract

In today's globalized world, it is a crucial agenda for all non-English speaking countries to educate their citizens so that they can function in English in a wide range of international settings. Although the Japanese government has addressed this eminent national agenda by implementing a series of curriculum reforms particularly at the primary and the secondary school levels, its efforts have yet to bring satisfactory results. The initial purpose of this paper is to provide a historical overview of the reforms and describe how English education at Japanese schools has evolved toward the development of communicative competence. The paper then reviews some literature that has examined issues brought by these government-led reforms to English teachers as they tried to react to the needs of the society. Four major areas of existing detrimental factors will be discussed in some detail referring to relevant studies. Lastly, based upon these reviews and the author's past studies, the paper attempts to propose ideas for future research in some related areas such as curriculum innovation, teacher development, and teacher psychology. The paper will identify four areas that seem to deserve further scrutiny and are expected to bring relevant findings not only for the Japanese context but also for the wider international context.

要 旨

高度にグローバル化した現代社会において、英語を使って国際的な場で機能できる国民を育成することは、英語を公用語としない国家において重要な課題の一つである。日本もこの課題に対処すべく、少なくとも過去30年にわたって教育改革を進めてきたが、その成果は未だ十分なものにはなっていない。本論文は、日本における英語教育の歴史的推移を総括し、文部科学省主導で「使える英語」「コミュニケーション型な英語教育」へと変革されてきた過程を振り返ることを第一の目的とする。さらに、英語教育改革をめぐる課題を考察した文献を調査し、その影響が行き渡らない要因を4つのエリアに分けて論じる。最後に、歴史的な変遷を念頭に、過去の文献の知見と照らし合わせながら、カリキュラム改革、教員発達、教員心理などの関連分野における今後の研究の方向性を提言する。政府の作成するカリキュラムと現実の教室レベルでの実践のギャップは日本に限らず多くの国々で見られる問題であり、現在の日本の問題を追究することは、日本の文脈のみならず広く汎用性

をもつ知見をもたらす可能性がある。本論文では、日本以外の文脈でも意味を持つと思われる4つの分野の研究の可能性について論じる。

1. Introduction

Japan has recently seen a series of historic curriculum reforms in English education particularly at the primary and the secondary school levels. At the primary level, there has been a movement toward promoting early implementation of English in the school curriculum. Foreign language activities became a required part of the curriculum for the 5th and the 6th grades in 2011. In 2020, foreign language activities will likely start in the 3rd grade, and for 5th and 6th graders, English will become a regular academic subject that entails assessment and grading. At the secondary level, the major focus has long been to develop students' communicative competence, and to this end, the government mandated in its 2009 Course of Study (COS hereinafter) that English class be conducted in English at high school (MEXT, 2009). This policy will likely be expanded to junior high school in the next curriculum reform, which is scheduled to take place in 2018.

All these changes can be regarded as the nation's reaction to the rapidly globalizing world, but many parties concerned, including practitioners, teacher trainers, and researchers, have raised questions as to the validity and the effectiveness of these reforms. The first purpose of this paper is to provide a historical overview of the reforms focusing in particular on how Japan's English education has made a shift toward seeking communicative competence. The paper will then review some literature that examined factors behind the sluggish spread of these government-led reforms. Lastly, the paper will draw upon these reviews and the author's past studies to propose ideas for future research in some related areas such as curriculum innovation, teacher development, and teacher psychology.

2. Historical Overview of the English Education Reforms

2.1. Early history

The history of English education in Japan dates back to as far as the Edo Era. At the end of this period in the mid 19th century, the nation was under growing external pressure to open its doors to the West, and English was taught as professional training for interpreters who worked for the government (Imura, 2003). English then became a subject at middle school in the Meiji Era, but middle school before World War II was not a part of the compulsory education, and so English was mostly learned by elite privileged people. The current school system began after World War II ended in 1945, and English became a part of the obligatory education at the early secondary school (i.e., middle school) as one of the foreign languages. Since then, English has been widely studied by almost all Japanese students.

Under the post-war school system in Japan, the school curricula at the primary and the secondary school levels are controlled by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). The ministry issues the COS roughly every 10 years to provide practitioners with an instructional framework for each school subject. Every new version of the COS comes with

some revisions, minor and major, reflecting changing social needs.

2.2. Past versions of the Courses of Study

Looking over the past seven versions of the COS, we might say that English is the subject which has undergone the most drastic changes. The first COS was issued in 1947, and the English curriculum prescribed in this document followed the guidelines in the Audiolingual Method of English teaching and learning (Imura, 2003; Tahira, 2012), which is a behavioristic language learning approach aimed at the acquisition of the four language skills mainly through repetition. The next COS released in 1958 still set the acquisition of the four skills as central goals, but at the same time, the importance of grammar was also emphasized. This revision came with lists of vocabulary and grammar items to be learnt in each grade in the secondary education. This provided a background for the establishment of the Grammar Translation Method (Tahira, 2012), which focuses on form and the translation of English texts into Japanese. This method served as the dominant instructional method in English classrooms at Japanese secondary schools for a long time in spite of all of the MEXT's efforts toward communicatively-oriented instruction (Gorsuch, 1998).

While the dominance of the Grammar Translation Method continued, the next three decades saw a series of MEXT's curriculum reforms toward teaching English for communication. The 1969 COS put more emphasis on language learning activities than on language items to be learnt, which can be seen as a first step to moving away from the grammar-based syllabus (Imura, 2003). What seemed to add impetus to this trend were the two international events Japan hosted in the 1970s, the Tokyo Olympics and the Osaka International Exposition, which triggered a change in the recognition of English education toward more integrated communicative skills (Yoshida, 2003). As a result, the term "development of communicative abilities" first appeared in the 1989 version of the COS while the prescriptions of learning items for each grade disappeared. As is often the case with national educational policies in general, this movement can be seen more of a political symbol created by policy makers as a part of the national policy toward the ideology of "internationalization" of Japanese people in the era of drastic economic changes (Lincicome, 1993). The implementation of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program in 1987 was symbolic of this movement in Japan's educational policies. The next COS in 1998 took one step further to state that a central purpose of English education was to cultivate the foundation for practical communicative abilities. As the emphasis in English education shifted toward communication, the prescribed vocabulary size was reduced from 3,300-6,800 words in the first version of the COS to 2,700 words in the 1998 version.

2.3. The current and the next Courses of Study

The current versions of the COS were issued in 2008 for elementary and middle schools

and in 2009 for high schools, reflecting MEXT's ever increasing interest in developing students' communicative abilities in English. According to Mochizuki (2010), the most salient features shared by the two versions (i.e., one for middle schools and the other for high schools) are summarized as follows: a) The four language skills should be developed holistically and used in an integrative way; b) language activities should be at the center of language teaching; c) grammar should be taught for the purpose of supporting and facilitating communication; d) the target vocabulary size should be increased. In addition to these, the high school version further stated for the first time that English "classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English" (MEXT, 2009). This policy applied to all the courses in high school English and was regarded by many as a historic change in MEXT's guidelines.

The next COS will be released in 2018 for primary and middle schools and in 2020 for high schools, but MEXT has already revealed some changes which will be included in the new guidelines (MEXT, 2016). It is likely that they will push the current movement toward communicative English teaching even further: the English-should-be-taught-in-English policy will be extended to middle school, and at high school students will be expected to "present and discuss" in English. Given the fact there is no going back in the globalization of the world, and the fact that another big international event in Japan, the 2020 Tokyo Summer Olympic Games, is under way, the social demand for English communication skills will continue to grow, and the reforms toward more communicatively-oriented language learning and teaching will be here to stay.

3. Review of the Literature: Impacts of MEXT's English Education Reforms

As we have seen so far, the English education in Japan has gone through a series of curriculum reforms according to the changing social needs in the post-war Japan—at least at the policy level. However, having a national language education policy is one thing, and applying the policy to the real teaching context is another. In particular, the difficulty of applying communicatively oriented language teaching to English as a foreign language contexts has been pointed out in a number of studies conducted in various countries including Japan (Butler & Iino, 2005; Humphries & Burns, 2015; Nishino, 2009, 2011, 2012; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005; Sakui, 2004; Taguchi, 2005; Tahira, 2012; Underwood, 2012), South Korea (Li, 1998), Turkey (G. Inceçay & V. Inceçay, 2009), Taiwan (Chung & Huang, 2009), Jordan (Alkhayyat, 2009; Asassfeh, Khwaileh, Al-Shaboul, & Alshboul, 2012), and China (Rao, 2002).

Focusing on the cases in Japan, a substantial body of research has reported the impacts of its reforms since MEXT's communicative turn in the 1980s (e.g., Butler & Iino, 2005; Humphries & Burns, 2015; Glasgow, 2011; Koby, 2014; Nishino, 2009, 2011, 2012; Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; O'Donnell, 2005; Saito, 2017; Sakui, 2004; Taguchi, 2005; Tahira, 2012; Underwood, 2012). These studies collectively stated that the reforms have not been successfully implemented as intended by

MEXT. An overview of these studies shows that there are at least four levels of detrimental factors behind this apparent failure of the reforms: (a) context related, (b) teacher-related, (c) learner-related, and (d) issues inherent in MEXT's Courses of Study. Below I will discuss each area of factors in detail.

3.1. Context-related factors

The first group of hindering factors, context-level constraints, include the traditional educational culture in Japan, knowledge-centered entrance exams, large class size, and insufficient resources and collegial support. Although there is a wide range of school cultures depending on the school type and the location, Japanese secondary schools in general often provide their students with strict discipline (Nemoto, 1999; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, Yoneyama, 2007). The classroom instruction for major academic subjects such as the Japanese language, mathematics, science, social studies, and English is geared toward knowledge-centered, paper-and-pencil entrance exams, so it is mostly lecture-based, intense, fact-filled, and routine-based (Fukuzawa, 1994; Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999). If we draw from Holliday's (1994) distinction between two methodological cultures in English language teaching, Japan clearly belongs to the "TESEP" category, where non-native speakers of English teach English in a transmission style of teaching, often employing the Grammar Translation Method, as opposed to the "BANA" category, where English is taught mostly by native-speakers as a second language (Nagatomo, 2012). This does not seem to fit the methods implied in MEXT's guidelines. The keywords that might characterize the guidelines, such as learner-centered, communicative, activity-based, all come from the other methodological culture, "BANA". This mismatch in the socio-educational culture between the prescribed curriculum and reality and seemingly provides a macro-context that hinders a wholesale application of MEXT's intended reforms across schools in Japan.

To be added to this educational culture as another frequently cited contextual hindrance are the entrance exams to high school and university. The English portion of the entrance exams is mostly characterized by the discrete-point and passive nature, and for some prestigious universities, by the extreme difficulty of the reading passages (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Gorsuch, 2000; Kikuchi, 2006). Japan's school culture encourages teachers to focus on the whole-person education than on students' academic development (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999), and therefore, students' future well-being, which is believed to heavily rely on the university they go to, is a major concern for teachers. Thus, many teachers are more concerned about preparing their students for entrance examinations by teaching linguistic knowledge than about following MEXT-prescribed guidelines (Nishino, 2009, 2012; Taguchi, 2005; Saito, 2017; Sakui, 2004).

3.2. Teacher-related factors

Past research that investigated the impacts of MEXT's recent curriculum reforms mostly concerns teachers', not learners', perceptions and practices. This line of studies have found some teacher-related factors including their beliefs in particular teaching methods, their (perceived) lack of oral English proficiencies, their low levels of self-efficacy related to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and insufficient and inappropriate teacher training (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Kumazawa, 2015; Nishino, 2011, 2012; Sakui, 2004; Taguchi, 2005; Tahira, 2012).

In regards to teacher beliefs, past studies have found that some teachers believed in the traditional teaching method that focuses on grammar and reading while others agreed that one of their goals was to develop their students' English communicative competence (e.g., Kumazawa, 2013, 2015; Nishino, 2012; Saito, 2017; Sakui, 2004). However, it has also been reported that regardless of their beliefs in language learning and teaching, few teachers fully follow MEXT guidelines. This is partly because of the contextual factors outlined above, but also because of other complex factors. In particular, some studies reported that some teachers valued building a solid linguistic foundation among students through non-communicative activities more than simply teaching communicative English (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Kumazawa, 2015; Nishino, 2012). Furthermore, Nishino (2012) pointed out that teachers often situate their educational goals within their immediate school curriculum that concerns each student's development as a whole person. Among these situated goals, teachers naturally do not simply pursue the development of their students' communicative competence in English; they may well have other goals such as making students independent learners and thinkers, helping them learn to accept cultural diversity, or teaching the importance of world peace. To achieve these goals, many teachers opt out of the English-only policy and use Japanese in their English classrooms where they find appropriate.

Relating to another teacher-related factor, lack of CLT-related self-efficacy, Taguchi (2005), for example, found that the lack of expertise and experience in designing communicative activities was a principal obstacle in implementing communication-focused language activities. In addition, it is also possible that the lack of teachers' CLT-related self-efficacy comes from their perceived lack of English proficiency (Suzuki & Rodgers, 2014). These issues, along with the issue of divergent beliefs in English teaching, might all be related to the last factor, insufficient and inappropriate teacher training. In spite of the training MEXT provides with secondary school teachers, some researchers (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011; Kumazawa, 2013; Nishino, 2011, Tahira, 2012) pointed out that teachers need more training before they become comfortable users of communicative language teaching. In particular, Nishino (2012) made some concrete suggestions for teacher trainers. She claimed that providing pre- and in-service teachers with opportunities to experience teaching in communicative approaches is crucial. Besides, it is also essential that teacher trainers allow teachers to maintain their own teaching style to some degree when the trainers introduce new teaching

methodologies.

Finally, a hidden teacher-related factor comes from the fact that secondary school teachers in Japan are simply too busy. According to Okano and Tsuchiya (1999), one of the unique features of Japan's school culture is the extensive range of professional roles and responsibilities teachers assume. They argued that Japanese teachers tend to work long hours because they take responsibility for students' development not only in cognitive (i.e., subject matter) but also emotional, social and physical areas. Although almost all secondary-level teachers are specialist subject teachers, teaching their subject is only a part of their duties. The heavy workloads imposed on secondary school teachers leave them little time and energy for responding to MEXT's call for curriculum change (Kumazawa, 2013).

3.3 Issues related to learners and MEXT's Courses of Study

As by-products of the research on teachers' perceptions of MEXT's curriculum reforms referred to above, some learner-related issues have also been raised. One of the major issues is learners' insufficient English proficiency levels (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Taguchi, 2005). In addition, learners whose primary goal in studying English is usually to pass university entrance exams generally lack motivation for acquiring communicative competence in English (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008; Taguchi, 2005).

On top of these, a fundamental factor behind the delayed spread of MEXT's curriculum guidelines may lie in the guidelines themselves. Regarding this point, Tahira (2012) argued referring to the recent COS that MEXT's official documents are not well understood because they lack practice-level explanation as to what is expected of teachers under the particular COS. Obviously the lack of clear definitions of the expected goals and concrete exemplifications has hindered teachers from making any real changes at the classroom level.

4. Suggestions for Future Research

I have so far provided a historical overview of MEXT curriculum reforms and a review of the past literature on the impacts of MEXT's English education reforms. The previous two sections have shown that in spite of MEXT's intention toward more communicatively oriented language instruction, various constraints have inhibited the widespread application of the reforms prescribed in their curriculum guidelines. The studies reviewed above, however, were mostly conducted before 2012-2013, that is, before the latest versions of the COS were enacted. This means that the impacts of the latest reforms were not reflected much in their findings.

4.1. Future research within the Japanese context

To evaluate the impacts, MEXT has published the results of their investigation of the local-

level practice in English classrooms across Japan in the past several years. According to their most recent annual reports (MEXT, 2015, 2016, 2017), there has not been any drastic change in students' English proficiency levels, but we can see some visible changes in some teacher- and context-related factors. The first notable impact is observed in the ratio of teachers' English use in the classroom. In the 2016 survey, over 60% of middle school English teachers said that their lesson was conducted mostly or more than half in English. The percentage increased by nearly 20% from 2014. At high school, the pace of the change seemed slower, but there were steady increases in teachers' English use in most English courses. As a possible factor to support these changes, the survey also reported a steady rise in terms of teachers' English proficiency levels. At middle school, the ratio of teachers who were verified by at least one English proficiency test to have proficiency at or above CEFR B2 rose from 27.7% in 2012 to 32.0% in 2016. At high school, the increase is larger from 52.3% in 2012 to 62.2% in 2016. Finally, we can also see a salient change in terms of the local teaching environment in recent years. In 2012, only 33.9% of the high schools surveyed said they had made a list of CAN-DO statements and used it as their curriculum goals, but in 2016, the percentage drastically rose to 88.1%.

These changes, drawing from the findings in the past studies reviewed above, may bring some questions: Do these changes suggest that the latest revisions of the COS, unlike the previous versions, finally started to make some real difference among high school teachers and in their teaching environments? If so, what made this happen? Was it because of the COS itself, or because of other macro- and micro-contextual changes? How have secondary school teachers perceived the changes? Obviously, these will serve as important guiding questions in the future research in this area. These questions will be primarily addressed by conducting a large-scale survey with secondary school teachers. In addition, if researchers want to tap deeper into the contextual changes or teacher perceptions, a mixed method investigation using a survey and subsequent interviews and class observations will be very effective.

4.2. Future research beyond the Japanese context

As briefly mentioned above, the failure of top-down curriculum reforms toward the communicatively oriented language teaching has been pointed out not only in the Japanese context but also in other English-as-a-foreign-language contexts. Furthermore, the issue of a mismatch between top-down educational reforms and classroom-level practice is a ubiquitous phenomenon. This means that the current educational landscape in Japan can provide opportunities for researchers to explore issues that hold relevance beyond the Japanese context. Specifically, I would like to single out four potential areas for further investigation based on past research including my own.

First, it will be of interest to examine how teachers contextualize the COS in their own educational environments. As mentioned above, one of the detrimental factors against a wider

application of the curriculum reform guidelines lies in the ambiguity of this official document (Tahira, 2012). If MEXT's recent reports hold true, teachers are now trying to change their practice according to the official guidelines by, for example, increasing the amount of their English use or drafting a CAN-DO statement that fits their school settings. In the process of making these changes, they should be interpreting the COS in the light of their own context. Investigating into this process of contextualization of the national curriculum guidelines seems to bring valuable insights into the issue of how educational reforms can be successfully implemented at the classroom level.

Relating to the first point, it might also be worthwhile to examine whether, and how, individual teachers internalize the COS. In my study about mid-career secondary school teachers who could be regarded as successful practitioners of communicative language teaching (Kumazawa, 2014), I found that one of the factors behind their successful deliveries of communicative language teaching was the fact that these teachers had a clear personalized definition of what it meant to teach English at secondary school as well as clear personalized goals as secondary school English teachers. Furthermore, they managed to accommodate the national curriculum policy in a way it matched their context and also their goals. In other words, they successfully contextualized and *internalized* the goals suggested in the official guidelines. When I see a seeming change in the teacher practice in MEXT's report, I wonder whether these secondary school teachers in MEXT's surveys have internalized the prescribed curriculum guidelines or whether they are just responding to the external pressure coming from the drastic curriculum changes. This question can be situated within the general teacher belief and teacher cognition research, one of which issues is to investigate how teachers *accommodate* new input (Kubanyiova, 2012); therefore this would make a valid question for broader contexts beyond Japan.

The third area into which we can investigate also concerns teacher development. Becoming a good teacher takes a lifetime commitment, and so maintaining high levels of motivation and commitment is crucial for sustainable teacher development. In my past study of novice teachers' motivational changes (Kumazawa, 2013), I found that large gaps between teachers' ideal self concepts and their actual teaching environments acted as a significant demotivating factor. The novice teachers in the study who had wished to teach communicative English found themselves in environments where their enthusiasm for innovation was not appreciated, and this made them quickly disillusioned and demotivated. On the other hand, in another study (Kumazawa, 2014) which I mentioned above, I discovered that the successful mid-career teachers maintained surprisingly high levels of commitment to teaching after over 20 years of teaching. Currently, MEXT is trying to address the issue of in-service secondary school English teacher training by providing them with opportunity for further professional development, in particular toward the use of communicative language teaching methods. Of course it seems meaningful in future research to validate the effects of these measures and examine whether there are some other needs that should

be addressed; what is more, it will be also important to explore for further generalizable findings on how some teachers successfully and unsuccessfully maintain their motivation when they are under the pressure from the rapid educational reforms.

The final key concept is the issue of collegiality. As some past studies reported (Humphries & Burns, 2015; Saito, 2017), the levels of collegial support and mutual understanding of shared goals make a significant difference in individual teachers' practice, especially in the time of curriculum innovation. My two past studies (Kumazawa 2013, 2014) presented two typical cases: In one, young teachers' fresh enthusiasm for change was stifled by the "unequal distribution of power within the staff room" (Nias, 1984) whereas in the other, the teachers who had shared goals with their colleagues enjoyed environments conducive to their innovative teaching style. At present, MEXT's reports about the increased implementation of local-based CAN-DO statements seem to imply that the school environments might also be changing to be more in line with the official curriculum guidelines. Future research may need to start by investigating to what degree micro-contextual changes are happening at secondary schools, but more importantly, it should hold broader relevance to examine *how* the changes in the local contexts are happening—whether they are top-down, bottom-up, or both of these—and how the process is making a difference in individual teachers' classroom-level practice.

5. Conclusions

This short paper attempted to suggest some possible orientations that researchers can take to address this issue of Japan's curriculum reforms in English education from an academic point of view. To this end, the paper started by providing a historical perspective of the past reforms and then reviewed the past literature to identify some factors that have hindered a successful implementation of the national curriculum reform at the local level. The paper ended with a number of suggestions for future research which will hold relevance not only to the Japanese context but also to the wider international context. Although this paper may be limited in its scope, I hope it presents some concrete information and suggestions for future researchers and ultimately makes some contribution to a more successful teaching of English in Japan and other non-English speaking countries.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grand Number 16K02978.

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