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# Will the New English Curriculum for 2013 work?

### Keywords

education policy, MEXT, English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP), Language Across the Curriculum (LAC)

The Ministry of Education's revised curriculum for 2013 details system-wide changes aimed at improving the content and delivery of English education. The proposed changes mark an attempt at designing curricula that are integrated from elementary school upwards. Central to the new curriculum guidelines is the concept of *gengo-ryoku* (language ability), implying a coordinated focus on expression in Japanese across the curriculum. It is assumed that skills learned in the first language will transfer more easily to foreign language instruction. This article examines the new Course of Study for senior high school following a brief review of previous curriculum documents. The key concern is whether the new ambitious English curriculum can succeed. A number of issues surrounding this question are raised that point to the need for a fundamental shift in thinking about teaching, learning and educational policy in general.

2013年実施の新しい学習指導要領では、英語教育の内容や方法に影響を与えることを目的とし、システム全体の変更を詳述している。小学校以上の英語カリキュラムを統合するような新しいカリキュラムを作る試みが提案されているが、新しい学習指導要領の中心となるのは、日本語表現に重点を置くことを示唆した、言語力（言語能力）の概念である。第一言語で学習したスキルは、より容易に外国語にも移行するものと推察される。本論では、従来の学習指導要領も概観しながら、高等学校における新しい学習指導要領を検討する。主要な関心事は、この新しい意欲的な英語カリキュラムが成功するかどうかである。この点に関連する多くの論点が掲げられ、教授、学習、教育方針に関しての根本的な考え方の転換の必要性が指摘されている。

MAN Y JALT members were no doubt surprised to learn at the end of 2008 that Japanese government officials expect English classes to be taught in English (MEXT, 2008a). In fact, the curriculum document calls for even more radical changes beginning in 2013. In this paper, I will consider briefly the potential for success of the new curriculum guidelines. My intention is to stir the pot and ignite broader discussion on this important topic.

With a deep sense of pessimism, *The Japan Times* labeled the new curriculum for 2013 to be “too little too late.”

This conversion from traditional methods to a more active and communicative approach is decades behind the rest of the world. As China, Vietnam and South Korea have moved ahead, Japan's English education policies have languished. It may be a case of too little too late. Japan's position in the future internationalized world will be determined by the nation's English ability. (“English taught in English,” 2009)

Similarly, Clark (2009) concludes: “Despite six years of middle and high school study, many Japanese are still unable to speak English well (...) the bureaucrats plan to solve this problem by giving us more of what caused the problem.” Such comments sum up the frustration regarding Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) policy directives over the years. While the bureaucrats in Tokyo set the curriculum guidelines, classroom teachers are left with the difficult chore of interpreting them at the chalkface. MEXT does deserve a large share of the blame for deficiencies in the education system in Japan, but the story is surely more complex than that.

### Critiques of past plans

It is useful to first look back before considering the proposed curriculum changes. In 1989, the Ministry of Education issued a new *Course of Study* influenced by communicative language teaching (CLT) and the concept of communicative competence (MEXT, 1989). The communicative goals of the 1989 curriculum were broadened in the 2003 follow-up plan around the slogan of *Japanese with English abilities*. Instruction is to emphasize acquisition of basic and practical communication

abilities so that the entire public can conduct daily conversation and exchange information in English (MEXT, 2003). A cornerstone of the new communicative orientation in English education is the Oral Communication II course, centering on discussion and debate. Unfortunately nobody has adopted this curriculum, according to Yoshida (2009). Avoidance was also the overwhelming reaction to the groundbreaking communicative courses initiated in 1989, Oral Communication A (conversation) and Oral Communication C (public speaking) (Browne & Wada, 1998).

The 2003 MEXT Action Plan has a strong emphasis on practical English skills. High school graduates should have the ability to communicate in English, while the exit target for university graduates is the ability to use English in their work (MEXT, 2003).

Gains in communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980) obviously take a good deal of time. A major criticism of the 2003 Action Plan is that proficiency goals are not realistic given the limited time allocated to English study (Hato, 2005). More to the point, Hato claims that the ministry's narrow exam-oriented definition of goals could actually sabotage its primary aim of evaluating the communicative abilities of Japanese English language learners more appropriately. So, rather than put a much stronger emphasis on improving teacher education and materials, the ministry decided to keep relying on testing to motivate students to improve their proficiency in the English language (Hato, 2005).

The MEXT slogan *Japanese with English abilities* implies communicative ability, while *juken eigo* (English for entrance exams) remains entrenched. In spite of a curricular emphasis on communicative English since 1989, the entrance tests continue to set the standards for English study in Japan. It is no secret that university entrance exams typically test translation, reading comprehension and grammar with many questions and answers written in Japanese (Kikuchi, 2006). Some private universities are experimenting with new types of entrance tests. However, most students currently need not display much communicative ability on the high-stakes public university entrance exams. The result is that despite the growing emphasis on oral communication in curricula, high school instruction still largely focuses on reading and writing (Butler & Iino, 2005, p. 29).

Such critiques invite the question: What does communicative use of the language mean in English classes where nearly all instruction is done in Japanese? The apparent paradox led some observers to attribute buzzword qualities to the term *communication* as it has been used in English language education in Japan for over twenty years (e.g., Chiba

& Matsuura, n.d.). The 2013 curriculum reform aims to change this situation at last.

### Central policy and local dynamics

In Japan's centralized system, policy comes down from MEXT bureaucrats to local school administrators and teachers. Put simply, officials at the Ministry of Education in Tokyo set the agenda, thereby attempting to shape educational values in the system (McVeigh 2005, 2006; Stewart, 2008; Tamamoto, 2009). This power relationship dominates the education environment in Japan.

While the highly centralized power in the Japanese system hampers the effective implementation of educational reform policies, the Ministry of Education does not hold all of the cards. State policy may on the surface possess official authority, but can lack authenticity in terms of enactment (e.g., Sato, 2002). From the perspective of many classroom teachers it appears that new initiatives from MEXT can be interpreted as less than helpful. The focus of current state policy in foreign language teaching in Japan is on *communicative English*, but evidence suggests that many teachers value content coverage and entrance test preparation above adhering to central policy directives (Wada, 2002). Thus, central bureaucratic goals are not necessarily interpreted as national goals. Teachers must deal directly with students, school administrators and parents who have their own agendas regarding education. This interaction filters each teacher's personal interpretation of the state curriculum. Tensions within the system, therefore, can result in stakeholders pulling in opposing directions.

### The new Course of Study

A comprehensive pedagogical approach is advocated in the revised curriculum guidelines (MEXT, 2008a). A *Language Across the Curriculum* approach (Sudermann & Cisar, 1992) is to be employed with Japanese language at the center (*gengo ryoku*). This means that in all subjects, language skills will be emphasized in order to elevate literacy, reasoning ability and communication skills (MEXT, 2008b). The expectation is that students will be able to transfer skills practiced in their first language to foreign language classes (Yoshida, 2009).

The proposed new *Course of Study* for senior high school English emphasizes nurturing communicative ability in English amongst students through the integration of listening, reading, speaking, and writing skills. More attention will be given to speaking and listening, marking a notable shift from the traditional grammar-translation approach (MEXT,

2008a). This change aligns the new curriculum guidelines with the current trend in the field of teaching English as a foreign language toward using tasks requiring an integrated skills approach (Rogers, 2004; Stewart, 2009; Willis & Willis, 2009). Underlying the new MEXT curriculum is the belief that grammatical knowledge is not the ultimate goal of language study. Students need to fluently understand, speak, write, and read both Japanese and English. In other words, structure cannot be separated from meaningful usage.

A glance at the course goals for high school English study reveals an ambitious proposal resembling an English for General Academic Purposes (EGAP) curriculum. In the English Communication II course for instance, students should reach and discuss conclusions about reading and listening material, and then write coherently about this information (Yoshida, 2009). In English Expression I students should develop impromptu speaking and oral presentation skills, and based on what was heard and read, sort and arrange similarities and differences from other opinions and combine them with original ideas (Yoshida). The follow-up course, English Expression II, aims to have students sort and arrange content, speak rationally, write in various genres, exchange arguments, persuade others and consider various points of view in order to determine resolutions (Yoshida). However, many Japanese university students cannot even do this in Japanese.

This is a comprehensive plan covering English teaching from elementary school through university. The Japanese government wants to make universities here more international and aims for 300,000 foreign students on campuses. In this regard, funding is now available through MEXT for the development of select degree programs in English (i.e., Global 30). This new *kokusaika* (internationalization) for the elite institutions in Japanese higher education is likely motivated by both economic and status concerns. Since the Japanese government began reducing state subsidies to universities, many have struggled ("Education in crisis," 2009), making an increase in enrollment by foreign students attractive. There is also evidence that top high school graduates in Japan look upon institutions like the University of Tokyo as inferior to universities abroad (Yoshida, 2009).

### Weighing the prospects

The Japanese government wants a world class education system but appears unwilling to fund it adequately. With public spending on education in Japan at only 3.4 percent of GDP, the lowest

amongst industrialized countries, strains in the system are increasingly evident and could end up harming the weakest in society ("Education in crisis," 2009). In Japan today, education quality and attainment level are rapidly becoming social class issues as those students whose families can afford it receive the best education. This suggests it might be time for the government to start funding the system more fully.

What about the entrance examinations? Certainly MEXT has made a strenuous effort in this area by introducing the Center Test, but this simply forces students to prepare for and write yet one more test. Since funding has been cut and enrollment in some schools is falling, 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. To reduce the number of tests, MEXT could offer substantial funds to institutions that adopt the Center Test as their sole admissions examination. But the reality of the situation illustrates the relative powerlessness of the government in this regard. The existence of institutional entrance exams, many of which place little or no emphasis on oral communication, significantly impacts the junior and senior high school curricula and how they are taught.

How can MEXT officials try to change the pattern of schools and teachers substituting the official curriculum with test preparation lessons? It is essential that language policy goals are realistic, consistent, and accurately reflect student needs and teacher capabilities. High school students and teachers place a high value on entrance test results. Indeed, passing the entrance test for a particular university is why many students study English. The new curriculum guidelines do not appear to alter this situation. One hope may be that the EGAP focus of the new high school English curriculum will inspire entrance test writers to move beyond testing English skills through translation, reading comprehension and grammar (Kikuchi, 2006). But such a shift is likely to be a long, slow process.

Are subject teachers prepared to teach their classes through a coordinated Language Across the Curriculum approach? This concern suggests matters related to materials, teacher preparation, training, and ability. How many teachers currently in the system are actually able to teach English in English? And will the government-approved textbooks be appropriately designed for a communicative EGAP curriculum? Once again, the central government needs to show teachers the money. But most importantly, MEXT needs to work with stakeholders to

shape the system in ways that cultivate motivation in students and teachers beyond schooling and testing and toward education. This truly would be an uphill battle given the powerful hold that statistics related to testing have on the system.

The emphasis of schooling over education is certainly not confined to Japan. For example, internationally respected scholars are livid about the U.S. No Child Left Behind Act (Cummins, 2009; Hargreaves, 2009). As in Japan, American public school teachers feel obliged to teach to the test.

The fetish for test statistics can be traced to the triumph of business values and competitive practices over more humanistic educational goals (Hargreaves, 2009). In Japanese universities, of course, the corporate agenda is all too evident in the ubiquitous job search activities of (absent) third- and fourth-year students. However, the staffing needs of Japanese transnational corporations for workers with highly proficient language skills could actually serve as a catalyst for drawing broad support for the 2013 MEXT curriculum.

The new curriculum, based on *genko ryoku* (language ability) in Japanese, is certainly comprehensive in scope. Whether it translates into effective change in the system will require a fundamental shift of thinking about both teaching and learning. All educators in Japan should closely observe how the groundwork is laid between now and April 2013 for such a significant change.

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