# Behind MEXT's new Course of Study Guidelines

**Keywords**
Course of Study Guidelines, MEXT, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Japan

The new Course of Study Guidelines of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) started to be implemented in stages in 2011. This paper reviews how MEXT's policies for English education have changed and examines how the Ministry has attempted to implement communicative approaches over the last two decades. However, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is not well rooted in Japan, so teachers do not fully understand it and are not confident about using CLT. This is the result of the lack of commitment by MEXT, which has led to ambiguity about CLT itself. This lack of commitment hampers the achievement of its ultimate goal of improving Japanese students' English proficiency. MEXT must provide greater support for teachers by clarifying its advocated principles and providing ongoing training opportunities.

新学習指導要領が2011年から順次実施されている。本論では、文部科学省による日本の英語教育方針の変遷を振り返り、過去20年間にわたるコミュニカティブ・ランゲージ・ティーチング（CLT）導入の取り組みについて考察する。CLTはまだ日本の教育現場に十分根づいておらず、教師側のCLTへの理解、CLT実践への自信も十分とはいえない。これは、これまで同省がどのような教え方をするべきかについて曖昧さを残したままにしてきたことの結果でもあり、日本人生徒の英語力を向上させるという最終目標を阻害するものとなっている。同省は、自ら推し進める理念を具体的に示し、継続的な研修機会を提供して教師支援をさらに行うべきである。

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*The Course of Study* is the series of guidelines for subject teachers officially released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (MEXT) soon after the end of World War II. The guidelines have been revised approximately every 10 years. They are now considered official principles for English education in Japan's public schools, providing overall goals and appropriate curricula. The latest versions were released for elementary, junior high, and senior high schools in 2008 and 2009, and began to be implemented in stages in 2011.

This paper reviews how MEXT's policies for English education have changed and examines how the Ministry has attempted to implement communicative approaches over the last two decades. It appears to be difficult for the Ministry to change its policies promptly and implement them. There remains a big gap between the stated policies and what is actually done in the classroom. In this paper it is argued that MEXT's commitment to new policies is in doubt, as evidenced by a lack of meaningful support for teachers. This lack of commitment hampers the achievement of its ultimate goal of improving Japanese students' English proficiency, which is quite low as is shown by TOEFL (iBT) test scores (ETS, 2011). In spite of a stated policy shift towards a focus on communication, the teaching principles advocated by MEXT are not fully practiced and understood by teachers, and the Ministry needs to provide further support for them.

## A brief history of MEXT's Study Guidelines

The first Course of Study Guidelines for foreign language teaching, as well as for other main subjects, was released in 1947. They stated that (a) habit formation was the ultimate goal in learning a foreign language, (b) listening and speaking were the primary skills, (c) it was advisable to accurately imitate

utterances, and (d) students should get used to English focusing on its sounds and rhythms without using textbooks for the first six weeks (MEXT, 1947). In fact, (a) to (d) above exactly reflect what Richards and Schmidt (2010) described as the Audiolingual method of English teaching and learning (p. 40). The ultimate goal of English education at that time was to gain Western knowledge from native English speakers.

Further changes in the guidelines emerged in the 1950s. One of these was the introduction of the number of words students should learn in school. The guidelines of 1956 designated up to 5,700 words throughout the six-year high school period (MEXT, 1956) as the appropriate number. The number was later reduced to 4,900 (MEXT, 1960). In addition, the importance of grammar rules was emphasized for the first time. The Ministry had placed special emphasis on listening and speaking skills in the early1950s; however, by the 1960s it was placing emphasis on grammar rules and language structures. MEXT's introduction of the grammar-based syllabus played a decisive role in the establishment of the Grammar Translation method, *yakudoku*, where "the teacher gives grammatical translation of written English in Japanese; students have few chances to vocalize English" (Nishino & Watanabe, 2008).

After the experiences of the Tokyo Olympics in 1964 and the Osaka International Exposition in 1970, the focus of MEXT's guidelines "turned from teaching four skills separately to a more integrated communicative ability to comprehend the foreign language" (Yoshida, 2003). However, the two features in the previous guidelines noted above, the designation of the vocabulary size and grammar-driven curricula, still remained.

With the dramatic economic changes of the 1970s and 1980s, MEXT guidelines began to indicate a stronger recognition of the communicative purposes of language learning (MEXT, 1977, 1978). This can be seen from the 1989 guidelines which declared, for the first time, that developing students' communicative ability in English was the central purpose of English education in Japan (Yoshida, 2003; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009). The launch of the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) program in 1987 was a symbolic event reflecting this policy change. At the same time, the vocabulary size required through the high school period was reduced to 2,200 words. The trend toward communicative English skills has continued right up to the present.

Since 2000, MEXT has taken a strong interest in the effects of globalization, and this has influenced MEXT's perspective on Japanese education. In the Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities launched in 2003, English was considered the primary international language; therefore it was thought essential for children to acquire communication skills in English in the 21st century. With regards to Japanese people's English ability, MEXT rated it quite low and insufficient (MEXT, 2003). In line with this evaluation, MEXT simultaneously listed several subpolicies to support the Action Plan. They covered a broad range of themes, for example, the incorporation of more activities in English classes, the introduction of English conversation activities in elementary schools, the introduction of a listening test in the University Center Examination (which was realized in 2006), and the sending of 10,000 high school students to study abroad annually (MEXT, 2003). At the same time, MEXT also required English language teachers to basically conduct classes in English instead of in Japanese. Many of the subpolicies have led to major changes in the latest guidelines.

## The latest MEXT Course of Study Guidelines

### *The guidelines for elementary schools*

In April 2011, the new guidelines for elementary schools were implemented in full. A critical revision is that foreign language communication activities are, for the first time, compulsory for fifth and sixth grade students. MEXT (2008c) claims that these activities aim at "fostering a positive attitude toward communication" (p. 1) instead of teaching a foreign language as a school subject. This is evidenced by the fact that the section dealing with these activities is separated from the section relating to other teaching subjects in the new guidelines. This is related to another important point in the guidelines: "homeroom teachers would be responsible for these new classes" (Fennelly & Luxton, 2011, p. 20). The reason why homeroom teachers are to play the main role in foreign language communication activities is that they are the teachers most

appropriate to remove students' anxiety and elicit their willingness to communicate (MEXT, 2008d).

### *The guidelines for junior high schools*

Several major revisions have been made in the new Course of Study Guidelines for junior high schools, which were scheduled to be introduced nationwide in all grades from spring 2012. One is that the number of class hours has been increased from 105 to 140 per year (MEXT, 2008b). Another is that the vocabulary size students should acquire in junior high school has been increased from 900 words to 1,200 words (MEXT, 2008b).

Another noticeable change is that now the importance of a balance in the teaching of the four language skills is clearly stressed (MEXT, 2008b) as can be seen from the overall objective "to develop students' basic communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing" (MEXT, 2008a, p. 1). In addition, MEXT (2008b) also mentions that it has increased the class time as well as the vocabulary size so as to increase classroom activities for practicing communication, not to increase grammar teaching. These shifts indicate that for MEXT the purpose of foreign language education is to foster communicative ability (MEXT, 2008b).

### *The guidelines for senior high schools*

Implementation of the new Course of Study Guidelines for senior high schools begins for first-year students from 2013. There are several changes in the new guidelines for senior high schools. First, as is the case for junior high schools, the new guidelines place language activities at the center of language teaching, and emphasize that all four skills in "language activities should be interlinked for comprehensive learning" (MEXT, 2009, p. 2). Thus, the required courses will be reorganized as English Communication (I, II, III) and English Expression (I, II), removing the old reading and writing courses. Second, for the first time in the history of Course of Study Guidelines, MEXT has declared that "classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English" (MEXT, 2009, p. 7). Third, the vocabulary size students should acquire in high school has been increased from 1,300 to 1,800 words. At the same time, MEXT has taken the position that "grammar instruction should be given as a means to support communication" (MEXT, 2009, p. 7). By emphasizing grammar as an adjunct to meaningful interaction, MEXT is moving toward more communicative approaches, reducing the dominance of Grammar Translation in teaching.

## Remaining concerns

### *The current situation of CLT in Japan*

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is defined as an approach to foreign or second language teaching which considers communicative competence the goal of language learning and emphasizes that learners learn a language through using it to communicate (Richards & Schmidt, 2010; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). More than twenty years have passed since MEXT's first attempted introduction of CLT. However, the implementation of CLT appears to be happening at a sluggish pace. A survey MEXT conducted in 3,598 high schools in 2010 indicated the reality fell short of language-use-oriented communicative activities (MEXT, 2010). The results show that 48.5% of the 9,726 teachers who participated noticed that less than half of their students' utterances were in English during oral communication courses. In keeping with the goals and approaches to teaching advocated by MEXT, which they assert will achieve the development of communication ability through using all four language skills, the latest guidelines attempt to promote CLT more strongly. Today, in the middle of the process to fully implement the new guidelines, problems in incorporating CLT in the actual classrooms still remain.

### *Varied interpretations of CLT*

A major difficulty which has prevented CLT from taking root in Japanese public schools is that CLT is not a teaching method but a set of approaches to language teaching; therefore, it has "many interpretations and manifestations" (Brown, 2007, p.45). The ambiguity around what CLT really is has resulted in varied teacher perceptions of communicative activities; thus many

teachers allow other methods and approaches to coexist. A study by Sakui (2004) found that "teachers spent most of the class time involved in teacher-fronted grammar explanations, chorus reading, and vocabulary presentations" (p. 157), while CLT activities "seemed to play a much smaller role" (p. 157). Likewise, Nishino's research (2011) involving 139 high school teachers revealed that they "did not frequently use communicative activities" (p. 132), even though they "held positive beliefs about CLT" (p. 132). She also reported that the types and degrees of communicative activities performed in class varied among teachers.

### *Guidelines not well understood yet*

Combined with the ambiguity of CLT, the insufficiency of explanations officially given by MEXT may militate against a shared understanding of the new principles. For example, since the final draft of the new guidelines for senior high schools was put forward in December 2008, there has been robust debate about whether or not the new policy of "teach English in English" is feasible. A few months after the new policy was introduced in March 2009, at a round-table talk hosted by *Eigo Kyoiku* magazine, attended by teachers and a MEXT official, the official stressed that the teacher's role would be to help learners to use language, not to give lectures (Taishukan, 2009). He also warned that having an image of a class as one in which the teacher gives a lecture in English all the time would indicate a misunderstanding of the real purpose of the policy. Accordingly, he noted, there is no need to conduct the whole class in English because it is often unrealistic to explain the rules of grammar to learners in English. His remarks may help us to more fully understand what is expected of teachers under the new guidelines. Nevertheless, these details cannot be found in official documents (on the MEXT sites as of October 2011). Therefore, MEXT's expectations remain obscure for many people. In terms of the newly introduced English activities in elementary schools, Fennely and Luxton (2011) point out that "neither the curriculum nor the guidebook seemed to be well understood" (p. 21), and the lack of understanding "can obviously lead to very serious problems in the future" (p. 21). Therefore, it is necessary that MEXT more clearly defines the type of classroom activities and ways of teaching which it expects teachers to adopt.

### *Need for teacher training*

An additional key issue is support for teachers when they have to accommodate the fundamental policy reforms. Although MEXT has provided training for teachers, researchers have found that there is the need for more training programs and support for teachers. Fennelly and Luxton (2011) found "a lack of confidence among teachers" (p. 21) despite "many of the teachers concerned… [having]… received 30 hours of English teaching training" (p. 22). They posit that one possible reason is teachers are still unfamiliar with the knowledge or strategies which are useful in CLT. They assert that "additional training is necessary" (p. 22) and suggest that the quality of training matters. Nishino (2011) stresses the importance of opportunities for teacher development where teachers can continuously learn from their colleagues. She explains that these opportunities are essential as it can take a considerable amount of time for teachers to switch to new ways of teaching, to accumulate experience in using communicative approaches, and at the same time, to overcome obstacles and constraints including class size and pressure from the grammar-translation-centered university entrance examination system (Nishino, 2011). In July 2011, MEXT (2011) released a report which includes supplemental proposals for the implementation of the new guidelines. MEXT plans to provide teacher training on a broad scale according to the report. Although the details of training programs have not been clarified yet, it is essential that more support be given in order for teachers to become confident and capable of teaching in communicative ways.

## Conclusion

This paper has discussed MEXT's Course of Study Guidelines. In the latest version of guidelines, the Ministry intends a radical reform of English language education by promoting communicative approaches more intensively in public schools. However, CLT is not well rooted in Japan, so teachers do not fully understand

it and are not confident about using CLT. This is the result of the lack of commitment by MEXT which has led to ambiguity about CLT itself. MEXT must provide greater support for teachers by clarifying its advocated principles and providing ongoing training opportunities. Over 20 years have passed since MEXT's first attempted introduction of CLT. It should have been a long enough period of time for trials and errors, and for the Ministry to recognize the realities experienced by teachers and reported by researchers. Based on the lessons from and reflections on the past, MEXT needs to commit to supporting teachers struggling to improve Japanese students' English skills through CLT.

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