

Implementing Language Education Policy to “Conduct Classes in English” in Japanese Senior High Schools

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In 2009, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) revised its national *Course of Study* for upper secondary schools and mandated that English subjects be conducted in English. However, in view of both native English-speaking and Japanese teachers' uncertainty about their roles in enacting the new policy, it is questionable as to whether or not it will be implemented successfully. This study, a combination of questionnaires and follow-up interviews, seeks to determine senior high school teachers' perceptions regarding the efficacy of the policy and propose suggestions for future consideration.

文部科学省は2009年に高等学校学習指導要領を改訂し、高等学校の英語科目の授業の英語化を義務付けるとの方針を発表した。しかし、ネイティブ講師、日本人講師の両者において自分たちの役割についての十分な理解があるとはいえ、新政策の実施が成功するかは疑問である。この研究では、実際に高等学校の英語教師へアンケートとインタビューを行うことにより、新政策の有効性に関する教師らの認識を確認し、今後の導入を成功に導く提案をする。

IN AN era of increasing globalization, Japan has arrived at a crossroads in its attempts to redress a perceived sense of policy failure in foreign language education. The revised *Course of Study* of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has incorporated pronounced measures to improve communicative competence in English to be implemented in senior high schools in 2013. The focus of this paper is on Chapter 3, provision 4 of the Common Content of all Subjects in the new *Course of Study* explanation (MEXT, 2010) that states the following:

Students should be given as much exposure to English as possible, taking into account the specific qualities of each subject. It is also essential that the *class is conducted in English* in order to realize actual communication situations in the classroom. When doing so, full attention should be given to using English that takes into account the students' level of comprehension. (MEXT, 2010, p. 43, English translation, italics mine)



While promoting the use of a combination of language functions that are appropriate for a variety of situations, MEXT is mandating that classes be conducted in English. However, the current challenges that exist in its implementation, not only for non-native speaking Japanese teachers of English (NNSETs) but for native-speaking teachers of English (NSETs), have been somewhat under-researched. This study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are NSET and NNSET perceptions of their roles in the implementation of the new provision to "conduct classes in English"?
2. Drawing upon such perceptions, can the provision to "conduct classes in English" be effective?

The current study employs a sequential explanatory design, which gleans information from surveys and conducts follow-up interviews with selected participants. Additionally, analyses of government policy documents and ministry-approved textbooks were carried out. For space considerations, I present only survey and interview findings of what is part of a larger project being carried out for my dissertation work at the University of Queensland.

The New MEXT Policy Provision: Conducting Classes in English

This section provides some background information on the new English curriculum for senior high schools. It will first provide an overview of the context in which the changes have been proposed, focus on the specific provision in question, and then highlight the current situation by discussing language practices in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms in Japan.

The Revisions to the Course of Study

According to a report produced by MEXT's Elementary and Secondary Bureau (2011), the current concern surrounding the

perceived academic decline of Japanese students in an increasingly competitive global economy influenced the new revisions. The subjects targeted for reform are math and science education, Japanese (*kokugo*), moral education as well as foreign language education (English). In senior high school, the new subjects in foreign language education will further integrate the four skills and further emphasize the productive skills of speaking and writing. Below, please find a table that contrasts the subjects in the current Course of Study with those intended in the new Course of Study.

As seen below, the current subjects of *Oral Communication* (OC) 1 and 2, *English 1 and 2*, *Reading and Writing* become *Communication English Basic*, and *Communication English 1, 2, and 3*, *English Expressions 1 and 2* as well as *English Conversation*. Such a wide-scale change is hoped to draw upon the cognitive academic language proficiency being developed in other subjects (Stewart, 2009) and increase students' ability to perform higher-order tasks (i.e., paragraph writing, discussion, presentation) in English.

Table 1. Revisions to MEXT Course of Study – Foreign Languages (English) Upper Secondary School (MEXT, 2010)

Current course of study	New course of study
*English 1 (integration of 4 skills)	Communication English Basic (bridging course for new senior high students)
English 2 (integration of 4 skills)	*Communication English 1 (integration of 4 skills)
*Oral Communication 1 (speaking /listening)	Communication English 2 (integration of 4 skills)
Oral Communication 2 (speaking /listening)	Communication English 3 (integration of 4 skills)
Reading	English Expressions 1
Writing	(integration of speaking and writing)

Current course of study	New course of study
	English Expressions 2 (<i>integration of speaking and writing</i>)
	English Conversation (<i>speaking and listening</i>)

* Students are required to take the subject. Subjects without the asterisk are electives.

The Policy to “Conduct Classes in English”

According to the new Course of Study, it is expected that teachers will conduct all of the new classes through the use of English as the main language of instruction, limiting the role of Japanese. Three key expectations of the policy, as described in the explanation of the Course of Study shall be briefly summarized below:

1) *In principle, classes are to be conducted in English:* Teaching should be done in English to maximize exposure to the language since opportunities to speak English are limited in Japan. English should be used when giving explanations of content, providing examples, providing assistance and giving feedback.

2) *There shouldn't be an overemphasis on translation-based practices:* Class activities should not be centered on explanation of points or simple translation or grammar instruction. In particular, reading-oriented classes should summarize main points and polish written work. All four skills in the classroom should be taught.

3) *Japanese is to have a limited role in the classroom:* Provided that the focus is on language activities, Japanese may be used to explain grammar. However, even though Japa-

nese can be used at times for language activities, it is important to uphold the central tenet of conducting lessons in English.

The expectations above are not entirely new, since the Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities called for the majority of an English class to be conducted in the target language (TL) of English in 2003. However, Japanese is generally viewed as the medium of instruction in EFL classes in Japan according to the research literature (Gorsuch, 1998; Hino, 1988; LoCastro, 1996). The government hopes to change this with the enactment of the new policy.

Language Education Policies, Monolingualism and “Best Methods”

This study adopts a critical perspective toward the formulation of language education policies that may promote certain teaching methods over others. According to Liddicoat (2004), policy decisions “fail to give attention to the context in which a language is being taught” (p.155), which may lead to their failure or non-implementation. This is especially true of EFL contexts where English is not spoken outside the classroom. To be sure, there are several benefits to using the TL in the classroom; it is indeed practical for students and teachers to use as much of it as possible so that they can maximize exposure to the TL and acquire skills at negotiating meaning, consonant with Krashen’s Input Hypothesis, and Long’s Interaction Hypothesis (cited in McKay, 2009). However, policy-makers overly draw on beliefs in English language teaching (ELT) that English is better taught monolingually (*the monolingual fallacy*), and that the more English is taught the better the results, or the *maximum exposure fallacy* (Phillipson, 1992), as they strive to increase the use of the TL through more communicative approaches. Similar to Phillipson’s (1992) fallacies are what Lin and Man (2009) refer to as

the immersion myth, which suggests that acquisition of a second language can be accelerated simply by using the L2 as the language of instruction (LoI), and *the purism myth*, which suggests that the first language (L1) does not have a bridging role to play in the learning of a second language.

It becomes necessary to critically examine the construction of policies that aim to promote one method in particular as the "best method", especially when, as Canagarajah (2002) stated, "...what teachers practice in their classrooms rarely resembles any specific method" (p. 145). For example, it has been regularly documented in literature on the teaching of modern foreign languages (Macaro, 2009) as well as in bilingual and English-medium classrooms in postcolonial contexts (Lin, 2008; Canagarajah, 1999) that teachers engage in classroom code-switching (CCS) to make content accessible to learners, manage their classrooms, and maintain social harmony. The literature on classroom language use in other similar expanding circle contexts in the EFL classroom such as South Korea (see Liu, Baek, Ahn, & Han, 2004) has come to much of the same conclusion. Therefore, it remains to be seen to what extent the new MEXT policy will indeed work due to the lack of alignment of the policy's message with teachers' perceived realities.

Current Language Practices in Japanese Senior High Schools

The literature on ELT in Japan has established that there is a conflict between language education policy goals at the macro level and current realities at the classroom level (Butler & Iino, 2005; Gorsuch, 1999). This discontinuity may lead to role confusion and ambiguity amongst teachers, which could then result in *de facto* practices that work against successful macro policy implementation. In this case, such practices may involve L1 use through translation-based approaches in spite of governmental

wishes to use more English in the classroom through communicative approaches.

Both NSETs and NNSETs have struggled with their use of the TL in the classroom. O'Donnell (2005) notes the difficulties of a Japanese teacher who shocked her students into silence and complaint when she tried to conduct a lesson all in English. Yamada and Hristokova (2011) cite a MEXT study in which it was determined that NNSETs use less than 40% English in *Oral Communication* classes and less than 10% in *English 1* and *2* classes. In the case of NSETs, ad-hoc language practices may lead them to rely on NNSETs as "interpreters" for their team-taught lessons (Tajino & Walker, 1998), or to serve as "human tape recorders", seemingly defeating the purpose of developing communicative ability. Additionally, NSET classes may not be integrated with the wider departmental goals of the curriculum (Carless, 2006). Finally, the quality of NSET input does not necessarily lead to increased quality in student output, as pointed out by Ogasawara (2008). Hence there are concerns about the success of the policy from the perspectives of both groups of teachers.

In summary, the aforementioned factors may operate against the successful implementation of the policy to conduct classes in English. To explore this issue further, the methodology and findings of my research will be presented in detail.

Methodology

This project adopts a sequential explanatory research design (Dornyei, 2007), in which quantitative and qualitative data were collected respectively. A purposive sample of teachers who taught in private schools was targeted. A 17-item questionnaire was sent to 80 English teachers who teach at private junior/senior high schools, of which 53 NSET and NNSET teachers who teach senior high school classes responded. In this study,

I present interview data from four teachers, 2 NNSETs, and 2 NSETs, who consented to participate. I investigated private school teachers because although they are in the minority, they tend to employ more NSETs, who may have more flexible roles in the development of the curriculum. Private schools also have more autonomy in curriculum design. The NSETs in this study were not employed as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs).

Questionnaires were sent out to participants through a private teaching agency that employs NSETs. Additionally, I contacted teachers at a Japanese college, who provided me access to more participants. I forwarded all parties questionnaires and information sheets that gave them the chance to accept or decline the invitation to interview. One-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted for those who accepted the invitation.

Descriptive statistics were tallied to reflect teacher perceptions of their current language use and perceptions of the new policy. In addition, I recorded all interviews, transcribed them and coded teachers' responses based on a multilayered framework (see Zhang, 2005) that perceives policy (non) implementation as occurring at various levels:

- Implementer factors (teacher proficiency in the TL, student proficiency in the TL, teacher beliefs, teacher education, classroom experience)
- Micro-contextual factors (class sizes, team-teaching, materials, methodology, departmental goals)
- Macro-contextual factors (language ideologies, the status of English, national education systems, culture of learning).

Results

In this section, selected findings from my research will be presented to address the questions regarding NSET-NNSET perceptions of their roles and their assessments of the new policy provision.

The New Policy Provision and Teachers' Understandings of Roles

It was found that amongst teachers, a large number of NNSETs "somewhat understood" what was expected of them in the new policy provision, whereas amongst NSETs, a large number of them were unaware that there was even a policy change to begin with. Table 2 below reflects their perceptions:

Table 2. Conducting Classes in English: NSETs and NNSETs ($n=53$)

Degree of understanding of roles	% of nonnative (Japanese) English teachers ($n=32$)		% of native-speaking English teachers ($n=21$)	
	n	%	n	%
Fully understand	6	18.8	3	14.3
Somewhat understand	22	68.7	5	23.8
Don't understand	4	12.5	4	19
Unaware	0	0	9	42.9

As can be seen, a predominant number of NNSETs "somewhat understand" what is expected of them (about 69%). While approximately 19% state that they "fully understand" the expectations of the policy, more than 10% claim not to. Perhaps not surprisingly, over 40% of NSETs were unaware that this policy existed at the time this questionnaire was administered.

The results show current uncertainty about teachers' roles. In one interview, one NNSET stated that there seems to be some "unnatural" aspects about what is being asked of teachers, especially Japanese teachers:

We are nonnative speakers and if we force ourselves to speak only in English, some parts are not natural. (NNSET 1, Interview)

In another interview with another NNSET, the issue of amount of language to use and the opportunities to prepare for the policy were brought up:

I think we don't have to use 100% English...because I can speak Japanese and [students] can speak Japanese, we can make use of that effectively...maybe teachers should study how to teach English using English more ... we don't have any places or any opportunities to do this. (NNSET 2, Interview)

An interview with NSET 1, a Canadian solo-teacher, also raises concerns about the policy, in particular, the section regarding the future role of the NSET in the classroom.

... again, I don't know *what* the foreign teacher *will do*. I mean I have no idea...do you have to work with a foreign teacher? Do you have to work together? Develop the curriculum? Or is it like, here's the curriculum, help me implement it? (NSET 1, Interview, italics mine)

NSET 2, an interviewee who is also a solo-teacher, stated that she hoped that the logistics would change, with team-teaching being replaced by "partner teaching" where the NSET and NNSET would each solo-teach half of a homeroom class, and collaborate on the lesson planning on a deeper, and more substantial level.

I think the Japanese teacher should get half the class and the [NSET] would get half the class and teach...I think that given a little bit of training on activities and what-ever, that a Japanese teacher can handle those things...

you would agree on school-wide classroom language and expectations. (NSET 2, Interview)

The Effectiveness of the New Policy

With respect to the perceived success of the new policy to conduct classes in English, NSETs and NNSETs' responses seemed to vary based on the table below, with NNSETs evaluating the policy more negatively than NSETs:

Table 3. Perceptions of Successful Implementation of the MEXT 2013 Policy – NSETs and NNSETs (n=53)

Will the MEXT 2013 policy be implemented successfully?	% of nonnative (Japanese) English teachers (n=32)		% of native-speaking English teachers (n=21)	
	n	%	n	%
Yes	0	0	6	28.6
No	15	46.9	5	23.8
Unsure	17	53.1	10	47.6

In the questionnaires, the NNSETs were more skeptical about the new policy than the NSETs, with none of them predicting that the policy will succeed. The NNSETs either rate the provision negatively (47%) or were uncertain (53%). Conversely, the NSETs seemed more mixed about the policy's implementation. While 47% were unsure, some NSETs were favorable. For example, NSET 2 answered "yes", and felt that all teachers "inately" had the ability to teach English in English with the right guidance, while NNSET 1 and 2 answered "no" and "unsure" due to the policy's practicality in the classroom with low proficiency students. Conversely, NNSET 1 felt that the fact that the

policy was introduced without changing the university entrance examinations was "strange", while NNSET 2 thought it would depend on the level of students and the level of teachers.

Discussion

In this section the implications of the findings will be discussed and the research questions will be answered in detail. Consideration will be given to the three constraints proposed by Zhang (2005) mentioned earlier.

With respect to research question 1, due to the fact that many Japanese teachers were not entirely sure about what was expected of them, it was striking how NSETs indicated in their responses the need for role clarification at the lesson planning level and curriculum level. This would suggest, similar to other research, a lack of clarity amongst NSETs as to how their lessons fit into the wider curricular framework of the school (Carless, 2006). For these teachers, it may be one thing to utilize more English in class; however, it would be fruitless if it were not being used for specific outcomes. Therefore, perhaps there would be micro-contextual constraints to the teaching of English in English due to ambiguously defined curriculum goals. Indeed, NSET 1's comments earlier highlighted the sense of uncertainty as to what the new curriculum goals will mean for collaboration between NSETs and NNSETs.

However, for NNSETs, implementer factors such as shared identities with learners were prevalent. Both NNSET 1 and NNSET 2 touched upon the issue of Japanese identity, and NNSET 2 mentioned the fact that a shared identity with the students can be an advantage in the classroom. Indeed, Medgyes (1999), in his seminal work on non-native English teachers, viewed shared identity and language as strengths of the NNSET. Therefore, there was to be a bit of concern about the fact that conducting a class exclusively in the target language might be "unnatural" for both

Japanese teachers and students. Additionally, NNSET 1 pointed out that the entrance exam - a macro contextual factor - was not revised to align with this policy was "strange". In fact, there have been revisions to the entrance exam in past years, such as the incorporation of a listening component in 2006. Therefore, her comments may suggest a tendency to discursively portray the entrance exam as an overall constraint. This points to the need to show teachers more explicitly how macro policies that correspond more clearly in terms of curriculum, materials, methods, personnel and assessment can indeed be implemented at the local level (see Baldauf, 2008; Liddicoat, 2004). As mentioned before, the lack of congruence of policy goals leads to lack of implementation from teachers.

With respect to research question 2), judging from the responses above, the NNSETs seemed very skeptical about the current provision, whereas the NSETs seemed mixed. This may be due to the fact that the Japanese teachers generally have more of a thorough understanding of the school system and its challenges than the NSETs. Such skepticism, however, would suggest that there needs to be a better process in heightening awareness and understanding about the policy, and convincing teachers of its possible success. Hence, it is in the best interests of the ministry of education to address this immediately.

In consideration of the above findings, I would like to propose the following suggestions:

Firstly, support for a "target-language" policy that embraces the concept of principled CCS as a viable option will allow teachers to determine what indeed is best for their students. Such CCS may vary between subjects; the MEXT study that Yamada and Hristokova (2011) cited, showed a significant difference between the use of English in *English 1* classes as opposed to OC classes. Teachers understand the need for their students to speak; however, it is unrealistic to expect a high level of English within all subjects. At the same time though,

the CCS recommended would need to be *judicious* and *limited*. Medgyes (1999) points out that the NNSET is a valuable role model for students. Such teachers *need* to use English more in class to further demonstrate that acquisition of the language is indeed attainable.

Secondly, for the policy to succeed, the issue of methodology and materials need to be addressed in teacher education. Currently there is a question as to whether the ELT textbooks in Japan promote the use of more English. To follow with the expectations of the curriculum, teachers will need sustained exposure to methods that promote communicative competence (especially pragmatic competence) in the classroom and learn how to facilitate this pre and in-service teacher training.

Thirdly, clear departmental goals are needed that somehow reconcile English for examination purposes and English for practical communication. Due consideration should be given to the NSET's role in English department, as oral communication classes will cease to exist. Enabling the NSET to truly engage in a more collaborative role with the NNSET through lesson and curriculum planning may also be a feasible option. The option of institutionally scheduled planning time might encourage more comprehensive goal setting.

Conclusion

This study has examined teachers' perceptions of their roles in the MEXT provision to conduct classes in English and its feasibility. Though the study is small-scale and conducted amongst private institutions and hence not generalizable, it begins to highlight some of the levels of concern that teachers may have in its implementation. It may be beneficial for future research in this area to focus on classroom language use in different English subjects, textbook analysis, or the examination of curriculum planning at the wider departmental level to determine ways to

actually enable it to succeed and improve the quality of English education in senior high schools in Japan.

Bio Data

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