MEXT-Approved EFL Textbooks and the New Course of Study

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The new Course of Study for Foreign Languages in senior high schools has been in effect since April 2013, yet little has been reported about the implementation process thus far. In particular, no studies have examined the nature of the textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for use in the new curriculum. Taking into consideration new perspectives on materials development in language-in-education policy and planning (Kennedy & Tomlinson, 2013), in this exploratory study we attempted to discern how the ministry-approved textbooks have interpreted the new curriculum objectives. It was found that even though MEXT has approved the content in the new textbooks, there are still notable discrepancies between textbook activities and national curriculum goals.

高校用の新しい外国語学習のための指導要領は2013年4月から施行されているが、それがどのように実施されているかについてはほとんど報告がない。特に、文科省が新しいカリキュラムで使用することを認めた教科書を調査した研究はない。今回の探索的研究では、教育における言語政策・計画（Kennedy & Tomlinson, 2013）の教材開発についての新しい視点を取り入れつつ、文科省認定の教科書が新しいカリキュラム目的をどのように解釈しているかを調査した。たとえ文科省が新教科書の内容を承認したといっても、教科書の活動と国の定めるカリキュラム目標との間には、注目すべき矛盾があることが分かった。

A S THE new Course of Study for Foreign Languages for senior high schools has been in full effect since April 2013, many schools have already started using the new textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in Japan. The textbook, seen as a mediator between the teacher and the learner (McGrath, 2013), serves special purposes in language education. When effectively used, textbooks can exert a positive influence on teaching and learning efforts in a classroom where English is taught as a foreign language. On the other hand, the textbook can also have a constraining effect; if teachers are unable to put the textbook to appropriate use, and if the textbook is not able to motivate students to utilize the target language, it may have a negative effect on the language classroom.

In the Course of Study for Foreign Languages in Japan, the textbook plays a central role in the teaching of EFL, as EFL classes must use ministry-approved textbooks in Japanese senior high schools. Additionally, all ministry-approved textbooks are subject to a rigorous screening process (McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005). However, the role of the textbook can be controversial, especially if its contents diverge from the intentions of the curriculum it was designed to implement. Researchers have found inconsistencies with EFL textbooks and the objectives in

previous curricula in Japan (Gorsuch, 1999; Humphries, 2011; McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005; Ogura, 2008). With the arrival of the new national senior high school EFL curriculum, it is worth determining whether or not the objectives of the most recent curriculum for senior high schools are reflected in the content and activities of MEXT-approved textbooks, which is the focus of this paper.

The Translation of Language-in-Education Policy Into Practice: The Role of Teaching Materials

In order to provide a conceptual frame for the current study, we interpret the coherent articulation of language-in-education policy and planning as contingent on four planning goals that stem from Kaplan and Baldauf's (2003) original language-in-education policy framework: curriculum policy, methods policy, materials policy, and assessment policy (Kennedy & Tomlinson, 2013; Liddicoat, 2004), which are then translated into pedagogical practice. Liddicoat attributed the implementation of policy changes in language teaching methodology to the four subgoals mentioned above, arguing that they interact with each other. We perceive *coherence* in the policy decision-making process to mean that the teaching materials and assessment processes should clearly and tangibly reflect the objectives of a national curriculum. However, if there are inconsistencies, teachers are very unlikely to take the policies seriously (Carless & Harfitt, 2013). Therefore, materials policy plays an integral role here because it is the materials that reflect in a tangible form what Zhang and Adamson (2007) have called the *intended curriculum*. An ideal view of materials development in the policy formulation process would envision teaching materials and resources to closely reflect whatever policy changes are articulated through curriculum documents and guidelines. However, at times this can be far from the case.

Theorizing Materials Development in Language-in-Education Policy

Few authors have attempted to create broader explanations for the disconnect between materials policy and curriculum policy. Kennedy and Tomlinson (2013), however, in a wider discussion of materials development and language-in-education policy, raised the following three basic observations:

- Materials developers compromise between radical new policies and strike a middle ground in order to appease parents and teachers.
- Further compromises are made by materials developers where new policies clash with accepted pedagogical practice.
- National examinations (assessment policy) do not change even though curriculum policy changes.

Also, Adamson and Davison (2003) proposed that slippage may occur between the intended curriculum and textbooks, which may be explained by economic pressures to sell the latter (see Tomlinson, 2013). These points constitute the conceptual framework that guided this study and that prompted us to examine the relationship between the objectives of the courses in the new senior high school curriculum and the content of MEXT-approved textbooks.

Studies on EFL Textbooks

Research on EFL textbooks has shown that at times materials development does not keep up with language-in-education policy innovation. Most textbook studies in Japan have focused on the gaps between the communicative activities in the textbooks and curricular intent. Ogura (2008) found a majority of the activities in MEXT-approved oral communication textbooks pro-

vided students few opportunities to express themselves freely in English. Additionally, McGroarty and Taguchi (2005) found MEXT-approved oral communication textbooks to contain a limited amount of pragmatic information. Both of these studies discovered that a large number of activities tended to focus on grammar through mechanical language activities that required students only to substitute, reorder, or replace information rather than to engage in more communicative tasks.

Furthermore, Humphries (2011) analyzed the *Vivid* textbook series and pointed out there is a disproportion of the four skills in the activities in the textbooks. Moreover, the analysis of one lesson demonstrated the lack of opportunities for students to use English freely, although the textbook authors stated otherwise in the textbook goal statements section (Humphries, 2011). Kobayakawa (2011) analyzed the writing activities and tasks in integrated-skills and writing textbooks designed for the 1999 Course of Study, specifically English courses English I, English II, and Writing. Her findings showed that these textbooks did not have activities for students to express themselves freely in writing and centered on controlled translation activities and structured writing activities.

Table 1. 1999 and 2009 Courses of Study—Courses and Objectives

Course of Study 1999, implemented in 2003	
Course	Objective
English I	To understand what they listen to or read and to convey information, ideas etc. by speaking or writing in English (MEXT, 2003).
Oral Communication I	To understand and convey information, ideas, etc. by listening to or speaking English (MEXT, 2003).

Course of Study 2009, implemented in 2013	
Course	Objectives
English Communication 1	To accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information ideas etc. (MEXT, 2011a, p. 1).
English Expression 1	To evaluate facts, opinions, etc. from multiple perspectives and communicate through reasoning and a range of expression (MEXT, 2011a, p. 3).
English Conversation	To develop students' abilities to hold conversations on everyday topics (MEXT, 2011a, p. 4).

(Writing row, top of second column):

Writing	To write down information, ideas, etc. in English in accordance with the situation and the purpose (MEXT, 2003).

All aforementioned studies examined textbooks that were mandated by MEXT and pointed out gaps in terms of how they represent communicative methodologies. However, they did not explore these materials in terms of how closely they reflect the articulated *objectives* of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages. Hence, we conducted this textbook analysis study to contribute to the literature and to explore, from a language-in-education policy and planning perspective, the coherence between textbook publication and national curriculum policy formulation.

Method
Textbook Selection
Before choosing the textbooks for the study, we made sure to familiarize ourselves with the objectives and content of each course by referring to the Course of Study. Table 2 shows this information.

Table 2. Textbooks Used in This Study

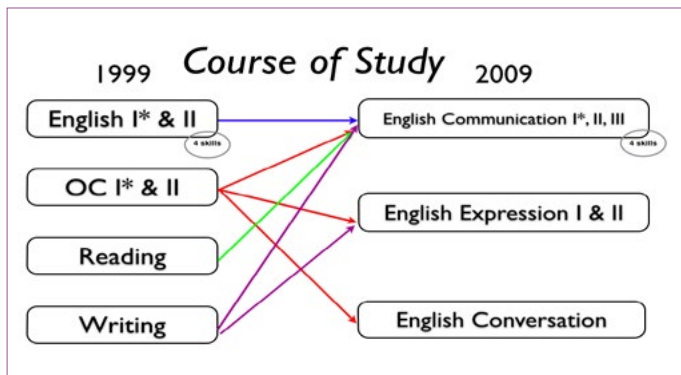| 1999 Course of Study (old)		2009 Course of Study (new)	
Course	Textbook	Course	Textbook
English I*	*Crown*	English Communication I*	*Crown*
Oral Communication I*	*Hello There!*	English Conversation	*Hello There!*
Writing	*Element*	English Expression I	*Vision-Quest: Advanced*

Note. *Required courses.

Figure 1. Restructuring of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages.

Figure 1 is a comparison of the courses in the 1999 Course of Study with those of the 2009 Course of Study, indicating some of the changes in the Course of Study for Foreign Languages. Single skill courses have been combined together, as seen in the combination of speaking and writing in the new English Expression I and II courses. In the 2009 Course of Study implemented last year, objectives for English Expression I, written and oral communication, are emphasized. Additionally, the content for English Expression I requires students to perform activities that are similar to the goals for the previous Writing course, but the new course requires that students speak and write.

Six textbooks from courses in the previous curriculum (1999 Course of Study, implemented in April 2003) and the new curriculum were selected. The textbooks chosen were all top sellers, according to sales information. The rationale for choosing textbooks with large market shares was to consider how these rankings might be related to the types of textbook activities presented. It was hypothesized that more highly ranked textbooks may more cautiously interpret the objectives of the new curriculum, as proposed in our review of the literature. A list of the courses in the curriculum with the corresponding textbook used in this study can be found in Table 2.

We chose textbooks from each curriculum created by the same publisher: Sanseido Press for the *Crown* series (English I and English Communication I), Keirinkan Press for the *Element* (Writing) and *Vision Quest Advanced* (English Expression I), and Tokyo Shoseki for the *Hello There* series (Oral Communication I and English Conversation). In choosing textbooks from the same publisher, we sought to determine the degree to which the textbooks aligned the goals and objectives of the two curricula as explained in the previous and current Courses of Study.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided our study:

1. How do the textbooks from the two curricula compare in terms of how they interpret the objectives in MEXT's Course of Study?

2. What implications do these comparisons have in terms of how teachers will implement the new curriculum?

Data Collection & Analysis

Data from each of the textbooks was collected by tallying all textbook activities in two lessons of each textbook and determining their skill focus. An activity was considered to be any exercise wherein the student is directed to perform any sort of task or exercise. In correspondence with Littlewood's notion of a task as existing along a continuum (Ogura, 2008), activities were considered to be any particular instance when the student is asked to do something, whether a grammatical exercise or a communicative task.

Activities were coded based on the skill focus (reading, writing, speaking, listening, or translation). A reading activity was defined as a set of exercises in which students had to read a section of a passage or answer a question concerning a passage. A writing activity was defined as an activity in which a student had to produce something in writing. These included grammar-based exercises as well as more open-ended composition tasks. Similarly, speaking activities involved students being prompted to produce language orally. Listening activities involved students being requested to listen to passages and then answer comprehension questions. Translation activities involved students being given a sentence in Japanese and producing an English equivalent.

At the analysis stage, we also noted the communicative aspect of the activities as well, drawing from concepts in Richards (2006) in regards to his framework for categorizing types of textbook activities. Table 3 lists the definitions of the types of activities that can be found in a language textbook.

Table 3. Types of Communicative Activities (Richards, 2006, p. 16)

Mechanical practice	Meaningful practice	Communicative practice
An activity that students can successfully carry out without necessarily understanding the language they are using.	An activity wherein the language control is still provided but where students are required to make meaningful choices when carrying out practice.	An activity wherein practice in using language within a real communicative context is the focus, where real information is exchanged, and where the language is not totally predictable.

Furthermore, when analyzing the contents of the textbook units, we drew upon Graves (2000) and the following criteria: (a) the manner in which the textbook developers conceptualized content; (b) the organization of the textbook, or in particular, the organization of the activities in the unit; and (c) the extent to which the content helped to achieve the objectives as stipulated in the objectives for the two national curricula. We compared how the textbooks aligned with the objectives of the courses in each curriculum. We focused on 1st-year textbooks because these were the only ones published from the new curriculum at the time this study was conducted.

Results

The results of the analysis in regards to the skill focus of the activities in the textbooks in this study are shown in Table 4. Percentages were found by dividing the number of activities for each skill by the total number of activities.

Table 4: Activities and Skill Focus: Percentages in Textbooks

	Course	Textbook	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening	Translation
1999 Course of Study	English I	*Crown*	13%	53%	4%	27%	4%
	Writing	*Element*	0%	59%	0%	0%	41%
	Oral Communication I	*Hello There*	0%	0%	29%	71%	0%
2009 Course of Study	English Communication I	*Crown*	29%	54%	8%	4%	5%
	English Expression I	*Vision Quest*	0%	62%	12%	12%	13%
	English Conversation	*Hello There*	0%	0%	29%	71%	0%

Sanseido Press: Crown (English I) and Crown (English Communication I)

Both English I (1999 Course of Study) and English Communication I (2009 Course of Study) are integrated skills courses; however, the four skills were not equally represented in the textbooks. The number of listening activities has decreased in the new textbooks as compared to the old ones. The number of writing activities in both of the *Crown* textbooks was over 50% of all activities. Furthermore, these writing activities tended to be mechanical practice. On the other hand, the number of reading activities doubled, from 13% in the *Crown* English I textbook to 29% in the *Crown* English Communication I textbook. The number of speaking activities also doubled, from 4% to 8%. However, although MEXT has called for more communication in the new curriculum, the number of translation activities appears to have slightly increased (from 4% to 5%). These findings show overall that there is some variation between the old and new textbooks in the numbers of activities for each skill.

The physical layout and order of the activities in the textbooks for both the old *Crown* textbook and the new textbook remained more or less the same. Most of the activities in both books focused on grammar and translation exercises. There were few opportunities for students to express themselves freely through communicative practice. For example, in each lesson of *Crown* English Communication I, students had only one opportunity to communicate in written and spoken form—this opportunity was usually the very last activity of the unit. Furthermore, ample opportunities for free written expression were lacking as much of the language was already provided to the students, and the lesson provided little scaffolding for learning as the major activities that required student output were before the grammar exercises.

Keirinkan Press: Element (Writing) and VisionQuest Advanced (English Expression I)

These two courses are clearly different in that the new English Expression I focuses on both productive skills (speaking and writing) versus just writing, as did the previous Writing course. When comparing the books to the objectives of their respective curricula, we found that there were discrepancies between the *Element* textbook activities and the objectives of the Writing course in the previous Course of Study, however, the *Vision Quest* English Expression I textbook activities attempted to represent the objectives of the new Course of Study.

In *Element*, each lesson spanned two pages, with the first page consisting predominantly of explanations of grammar. The second page had grammar- or translation-related activities or mechanical practice, mostly at the sentential level. Surprisingly, 41% of the activities were concentrated on translation, underscoring the influence of this methodology in Japanese classrooms. Nonetheless, the concluding activity of each lesson provided students a prompt for paragraph-style writing at the discourse level. Although this was the freer expression expected from students as suggested in the 1999 Course of Study objectives, the communicative practice was relegated to the very last activity of the unit.

However, *Vision Quest: Advanced* reflected the 2009 Course of Study objectives through its organization and content. *Vision Quest* started with a model dialogue for students to get practice and to activate schema. This was followed by a comprehension check as well as pronunciation practice. Following this, there were two or three sections focusing on grammar and translation, which contained exercises that were similar to the publisher's previous book, *Element*, and that took up a large proportion of the unit. The *VisionQuest* textbook provided students with scaffolded activities after the grammar practice that moved from meaningful to communicative practice, so that students could get a better understanding of the language in a communicative context. One interesting overall point to mention regarding the layout of the *Vision Quest* textbook in its entirety is that communicative activities related to each unit were collected together and located at the back of the book.

Tokyo Shoseki Press: Hello There (Oral Communication I) and Hello There (English Conversation)

The analysis of *Hello There* (Oral Communication I, 1999 Course of Study) showed that 29% of the activities were speaking related and 71% were listening related. Though one part of the objective for this course was to be able to comprehend information in English, listening activities were not as frequently represented in the textbook. The textbook was scaffolded, providing students ample input and output opportunities by having lessons that began with a sample dialog and ended with a communicative practice activity. Upon comparison with the English Conversation (2009 Course of Study) textbook, we noted that the proportions of listening and speaking activities were almost identical. The new version of *Hello There* did not include any new activities to further promote speaking and listening skills that were any more challenging that what was found in the previous version. The new textbook also had a similar layout, although some pictures and fonts differed. The activities in the new *Hello There* were not very open-ended, meaning that there were not many opportunities for free conversation on the unit topics, thus making it difficult for students to actually hold and maintain a conversation.

When we compared the course objectives for English Conversation and Oral Communication I to their respective activities in the textbooks, it seemed as if the textbook writers made no major strides to give the impression that the English Conversation course was any different from Oral Communication I. In fact, a close examination of the overall objectives for both courses revealed that there is indeed no difference between them (see Table 1). It is possible that the similarity in the *language* of the objectives for both English Conversation and Oral Communication I may have prompted the textbook writers not to produce a new textbook for English Conversation that is too radically

different, even though the new curriculum is intended overall to promote change in English teaching methodology in Japanese senior high schools.

Discussion & Implications

In this section we will discuss both of the research questions in detail considering both the quantitative and qualitative data. Caution must be taken when interpreting the data, as this project was small-scale.

With respect to our first research question, the data showed discrepancies between the textbooks and the objectives of the Course of Study for Foreign Languages. To be sure, the proportion of listening, speaking, reading, and writing exercises in the *Crown* textbooks for both English I and English Communication I altered slightly. However, the amount of communicative practice was still minimal. Clearly, this shows a conservative approach in terms of interpreting the objectives and contents of MEXT's new curriculum—evidence of a conflict between the curriculum policy and materials policy. Also, translation and grammar-based activities remain predominant, and writing is still the primary medium for conducting these activities. This is not surprising, as the assessment policy remains the National Center Test for University Admissions that generally privileges discrete point grammatical knowledge in its assessment of English ability. Moreover, communicative activities are limited in the textbooks, thus making it difficult for students to learn to freely convey their thoughts and ideas, as suggested in the new curriculum just as it was in the previous curriculum. *Vision Quest* is unique in the sense that the activities balance both grammatical and translation exercises to prepare students for university entrance examinations as well as communicative activities. This seems to connect more closely with MEXT's goals to promote communication through language activities. Nevertheless, traditional translation and grammar tasks still make

up a high percentage of the activities in *Vision Quest*. In *Element*, the composition of the textbook activities definitely conflicts with the curriculum objectives, as seen by the few communicative writing activities and the high percentage of translation activities. Finally, the findings further showed that there was alignment between the *Hello There* textbook for the new course, English Conversation, and its objectives. However, activities in the new *Hello There* textbook were more or less unchanged as compared to the textbook and objectives for Oral Communication I, even though the new textbook's layout and illustrations may have changed. The findings suggest that changes to textbooks give the impression that new textbook editions closely follow the objectives of their courses; however, in reality, the extent to which they reflect curricular change may be more cosmetic than substantive.

Regarding our second research question, it is evident that textbook writers and publishers are still making some compromises when producing new materials as a result of changes in policy. In the cases of Tokyo Shoseki and Sanseido, the textbooks were not radically different. When teachers compare the textbooks for the 1999 curriculum with those for the 2009 curriculum, it is possible that they may not see any clear evidence of alignment between curriculum and materials policy. The continued lack of alignment may not prompt teachers to teach any differently under the new curriculum. In addition, the fact that English Expression 1 was a new course prompted Keinrikan to create a new textbook for it and ensure that its activities correlated with the goals of the course. At the same time, Keinrikan may have had to consider the potential market of teachers who may not necessarily be amenable to using communicative methods in the classroom. Taking this market into consideration, the publisher included exercises that focus on both communication and grammar to placate those willing to follow the new guidelines as well as those who intend to resort to status quo practice. In short, the evidence in this study suggests that textbooks may not mark-

edly change in conjunction with language-in-education policy reforms, an issue that policymakers will need to address more forcefully.

The conflicts between textbooks and policy objectives could serve as a serious impediment to policy innovation in schools and classrooms. Teachers will ultimately be the ones who have to cope with these disconnects. Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer (2002) stated that teachers assimilate new knowledge about policy implementation into existing knowledge frameworks. If the materials are similar to those of the past, it is questionable whether teachers will be able to do anything differently without additional institutional or governmental in-service training support. Language teachers will have to develop pedagogical knowledge that will assist them in compensating for the short-comings of textbooks. Our findings show that, in general, the new textbooks show little difference in how they interpret the new curriculum. If teachers do not have the knowledge of how to supplement the new curriculum with additional pedagogical materials or how to adjust activities in existing textbooks to make them more communicative, the new 2009 Course of Study may not be delivered as MEXT recommended. Future research needs to be conducted that involves teachers as participants and elicits from them how they engage with their textbooks and how they compensate for the gaps between the curriculum and MEXT-approved teaching materials.

Conclusion

This study analyzed six senior high school textbooks from the previous national curriculum and the current national curriculum in Japan and looked at how these textbooks compare in their interpretation of the objectives of the past and present Course of Study for Foreign Languages. The results of the study show that the textbooks have made small changes in response to the revisions of the curriculum. The language of the new curriculum has continued to call for classes to prioritize the development of communicative ability (MEXT, 2011a). However, the contents of the new textbooks still generally prioritize grammar and translation exercises instead of spoken and written communicative activities, as had been the case in the textbooks written for the previous curriculum. In a White Paper document (MEXT, 2011b), the ministry stated that there is improvement in the quality of the textbooks as well as better alignment with the Course of Study, but evidence in this study brings into question whether this is the case. As it is MEXT that decides the curriculum and MEXT that approves the textbooks, is this a case of a lack of coherence between policy goals and materials development processes, or are the policy changes cosmetic to the degree that MEXT does not expect teachers to change the way they teach? In either case, future studies on how teachers use and adapt materials in the classroom should be conducted in order to determine to what degree they favor the new textbooks. In the end, as Gill (2012) astutely observed, teachers "are the ones who have to carry most of the burden of implementation" (p. 50) when it comes to language policy. We would like to add that the burden they face will be somewhat lightened only if they are provided with teaching materials that will allow them to do their jobs more effectively.

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