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# Setting the Bar High: Micro-Level Perceptions of MEXT's Elementary School EFL Policy

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This essay examines the opinions and perceptions of 15 elementary school teachers and administrators regarding the English Education Reform Plan released by MEXT in December 2013 in order to pinpoint problems that may occur over the following six-year implementation period. The study consists of short individual and small group interviews loosely structured around six questions concerning the proposed policy and its impact on elementary level EFL. Participant responses are analyzed for their possible implications for the following language policy metrics: compatibility, complexity, relative advantage, observability, and trialability. The essay concludes by advocating a two-way approach to curriculum development at the elementary level and citing a need for both macro- and micro-level policy actors to work together to effectively deal with the challenges ahead.

本論では、平成25年度に文部科学省が発表した「グローバル化に対応した英語教育改革実施計画」の6年間にわたる実施にあたって、小学校レベルでどのような問題があるかを突き止めるため、その実施計画を基にそれぞれの小学校関係者の意見をまとめた結果を考察する。今回の研究は、15名の現役のクラス担任、学校長、また教育委員会、ALTを対象に、実施計画の中長期的な影響を話題にした、1対1および小グループに対する6つの質問からなる聞き取り調査を行った。対象者の回答を分析し、実施計画について、適合性(compatibility)、複雑性(complexity)、相対的優位性(relative advantage)、可観測性(observability)、試行可能性(trialability)などの言語政策基準に基づいて論ずる。結論として、今後、計画の実施に関連する問題を克服するには、国と各地域における小学校現場との緊密な関連が必要である。

In December 2013, amidst the excitement of Japan's successful bid for the 2020 Olympic Games, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) announced sweeping reforms to its elementary and secondary level foreign language instruction policies (see MEXT, 2013). The primary goal is to increase the language abilities of both students and teachers through the establishment of teacher training programs, drastic curriculum overhaul, and the hiring of specialized language teachers (SLTs) and developmental leaders to spearhead the implementation process. While the policy affects both elementary and secondary education, there is a particular need to consider the

possible ramifications of the proposal at the elementary level, where the foundation for the initiative is placed and where change will most acutely be felt. Based on data collected through focus-group and one-on-one interviews, this paper examines teacher and administrator perceptions of MEXT's proposed policy changes for the elementary level in order to identify potential implementation obstacles and make the case for open dialogue between the macro- and micro-levels of the education system throughout the policy implementation period.

## Theoretical Background

Language Policy Planning (LPP) is generally understood to take place across two tiers of social organization: a macro-tier typically applied to prescriptive concepts such as ethnicity or nationality, and a micro-tier that Beales describes as “the sum of all the processes, happenings, or activities in which a given set or several sets of people habitually engage” (in Holliday, 1999, p. 248). For the purposes of this essay, the primary macro-level actor can be viewed as the Japanese government (or MEXT) while the micro-level constitutes the local governments and schools and the professional groups that operate within them. Although successful LPP implementation requires careful coordination between the various actors of both tiers (Baldauf, 2006, p. 163), the micro/macro mismatch in Japan's public education system is unfortunately a well-documented reality with teachers struggling to implement or achieve policy standards at the classroom level (see Ikegashira, Matsumoto, & Morita, 2009; Kumazawa, 2013; Nishino, 2008; Sakui, 2004; Underwood, 2012).

Waters (2009) describes LPP as a cyclical process consisting of initiation, implementation, and institutionalization (sustainment) stages. The initiation stage marks the critical period when a policy is still in development, its future depending on how various actors perceive the policy in terms of its compatibility, complexity, relative advantage, observability, and trialability (Rogers, 2003, pp. 15-16). During imple-

mentation, a policy will often pass through several layers of actors or institutions as it is transmitted from the macro- to micro-level, with each level ideally interacting with one another in a two-way manner as they pass on problems and solutions up and down the chain of command (see Figure 1).

The upward flow of feedback from the lower micro-levels, such as the interviews conducted for this study, are essential for the development and implementation of an effective and feasible language policy.

### Historical Context

Before delving into MEXT’s proposal, let us first examine the history of EFL instruction at elementary schools in Japan. Though the proposal represents a marked shift towards centralization of its language education policy, MEXT’s increasingly top-down orientation is consistent with recent policy trends at the elementary level and typifies the top-heavy role that the government has traditionally taken in the other areas and levels of education (Nishino, 2008, p. 29). MEXT began asserting control in 2002 when it announced that foreign languages could be officially taught as part of the Integrated Study Block at the elementary level, even though more than half of public schools had by that time already implemented some form of English instruction (Butler, 2004, p. 250). By 2004, it was already considering mandatory instruction hours (Kajiro, 2007, p. 101) and in 2012 officially began requiring that all schools provide 35 hours of English instruction for the fifth and sixth grades, though student performance would not be formally assessed or graded (MEXT, 2008).

### Key Proposed Policy Changes

It should be noted that the current policy proposal remains a plan until the Course of Study document is officially altered and ratified in 2016 (MEXT, 2013). The following points represent the major goals and changes set forth by MEXT for the elementary level:

- Establish mandatory instruction hours (35) for grades 3 and 4.
- Designate English as an officially evaluated subject for grades 5 and 6 and increase instruction time to up to 105 hours per year.
- Establish training programs for homeroom teachers (HRT), who will assume primary responsibility for classroom instruction.
- Hire and install SLTs to service the nearly 20,000 public elementary schools. SLTs will likely be primarily non-native English-speaking teachers with formal qualifications (MEXT is currently in the process of establishing what these will be) to teach English.
- Establish national and regional development leaders to promote and support program development.
- Create a communicative curriculum to develop the four core language skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), oversee the textbook creation process, establish assessment guidelines for teachers and students, and develop and distribute instruction and training materials
- Establish language foundations so students will ultimately attain a CEFR (Common European Framework for Reference of Languages) proficiency level of B1-B2, or intermediate level, by the time they graduate high school.

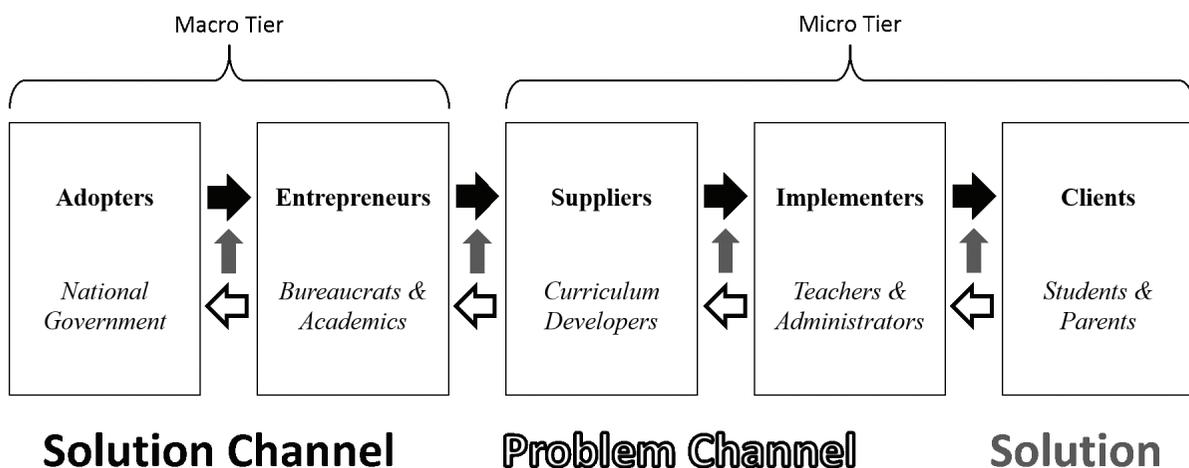


Figure 1. The Policy Implementation Process. Adapted from Havelock, 1969, and Flynn, 1980 (see Waters, 2009)

Policy implementation is set to occur in stages over the next 6 years, until 2020, with full implementation planned to coincide with the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games. The aims are unprecedented and ambitious, but to what degree are they compatible with the micro-reality of a typical elementary school?

### Study Rationale and Procedure

Because teachers “. . . filter, digest, and implement the curriculum depending upon their beliefs and environmental contexts” (Sakui, 2004, p. 155), it is important to consider how they and other micro-level actors perceive the policy in terms of feasibility and appropriateness. In order to investigate these perceptions, loosely structured individual and small group interviews were held with four school officials, nine HRTs, and two native/non-native English-speaking language teachers from three elementary schools. Sessions were conducted primarily in Japanese, and participants answered the following questions after first reviewing MEXT's plan (2013):

1. Do you understand the proposed policy changes, particularly as they pertain to elementary school English education? What areas, if any, are unclear?
2. Do you think that the current education policy needs to be changed? Do you agree with these specific measures? Why or why not?
3. Do you feel that this policy schedule is realistic?
4. What kind of role do you feel you should be performing in order to implement the proposed policy?
5. How confident are you in your abilities to perform such a role? If you are unconfident, why?
6. What potential problems or obstacles can you foresee in the implementation of the proposed policy?

### General Findings

Participants offered a range of different insights and answers (see Appendix for a more complete account), but the common points for each question can be summarized as follows:

1. Most participants understood the overall plan and policy goals but there was some confusion about the role of the SLT.
2. Participants agreed change is necessary to bridge the current gap between elementary and secondary language instruction, but doubts exist as to the extent student language abilities can be improved and maintained.

3. The participants viewed certain areas such as curriculum generation and training programs as feasible, but there was little confidence in hiring enough SLTs and improving HRT language ability by 2020.
4. Participants described their roles as implementational, performing duties designated by the national government.
5. Most interviewees expressed a desire to execute whatever role they were called to perform, but had doubts in their ability to produce the desired results.
6. There were many areas of concern including: HRT language ability, limited financial and personnel resources, scheduling conflicts, staff relationships, and overburdening HRTs who already have many other responsibilities.

### Discussion and Implications

Due to the small sample size (N=15), the extent to which the findings of this small study can be extrapolated to represent all micro-level actors is limited; however, the issues they highlight can serve as a starting point for more rigorous future investigation. Using Rogers's (2003) categories as a framework, the following sections will examine study participant answers in terms of their significance to the crucial initiation stage of the LPP process and what they could mean for the long-term policy success.

#### Compatibility

Analysis of participant perceptions reveals a number of possible compatibility issues with the new policy. From an institutional standpoint, one can cite logistical concerns such as finding enough time in the current schedule for the significant increase in language instruction hours. There is also the issue of HRT performance anxiety (see Butler, 2004, for a related case study), as experienced teachers may struggle with being put in a new role they may not feel capable of performing.

Participants also voiced concern about the possible negative socio-economic impact the policy could have, many worrying that the increased academic burden would only exacerbate the current academic gap between urban and rural areas. The Japanese government has been criticized on this issue before (Kobayashi, 2013; Terasawa, 2008), and given the documented shortage of qualified language instructors at many rural secondary schools (Ikegashira et al, 2009) the skepticism is understandable. MEXT will have to ensure that public schools nationwide are adequately serviced with

SLTs and other support staff in order to fight the perception that it is disconnected from the average educational environment.

### **Complexity**

MEXT, anticipating that effective curriculum implementation hinges on HRT language competence, has announced plans to establish training programs, curriculum development, and the SLT position. Many participants expressed confusion about how some of these elements were to be integrated into the current system, which suggests MEXT may still have work to do to explain the policy at the micro-level. The SLT position, judging by the responses from administrators, may pose problems for school officials who may have little idea how to delegate work responsibilities to a position that does not fit neatly into a school's present hierarchical structure. SLTs may also be at a disadvantage in adapting to their new position in that they initially may not have a working model to learn from on the job, a critical aspect of teacher training in Japan (Kumazawa, 2013, p. 47). MEXT provides a visual interpretation of the new hypothetical workplace arrangement (MEXT, 2013, p. 5), but the example only serves to reinforce the perception that the new system will be far more complicated than the previous one.

### **Relative Advantage**

Two fundamental issues at stake here are whether or not (a) implementing language instruction at the elementary level will actually increase student language skills/motivation and if so, (b) whether HRTs can be adequately trained in a limited amount of time to implement a communicatively oriented curriculum. Study participants expressed doubt or concern regarding the ultimate impact the policy will have on student and teacher language abilities, citing logistical issues and the other professional demands made on teachers and students by the current education system. The conclusions of other research related to the first issue also appears mixed: Some studies have argued that earlier introduction may improve certain language abilities, such as listening and speaking (for a full account see Katsuyama, Nishigaki, & Wang, 2008), yet others (see Kajiro, 2007) claim that gains are no longer as evident after students spend some time at the secondary level. Some research has also suggested that early instruction may in fact be demotivating for students, who begin to realize a disconnect between what they are taught and the available opportunities to use the language as they mature (Carreira,

2006). As for the second issue, study participants' concern over the extent to which HRT language competency can be increased through in-service training programs is supported by Butler's study (2004, p. 247), which revealed that after 120 hours of training only 7.8% of South Korean HRTs had enough English ability to perform communicatively-focused language instruction.

### **Observability and Trialability**

The two questions from above raise even more fundamental issues pertaining to how to measure the success of the program when key targets such as motivation and communicative competence have proven difficult to accurately describe and assess on a large scale. But even if we assume that such metrics are available and valid, the issue still remains that "... because the benefits to be derived are in the distant future, it will not be possible to know in any useful sense whether the plan is viable until it is too late" (Kaplan & Baldauf, 1997, p. 97). If the goal is for students to graduate high school within the CEFR proficiency range of B1-B2 and the policy will not be fully implemented until 2020, it may not be possible to make any conclusive observations until after 2030. Participant apprehension to the overall feasibility to the policy could stem from an inability to see positive results in the short term and may require MEXT to develop more concrete intermediate benchmarks by which to evaluate policy progress.

### **Conclusion**

Although this paper has taken a critical position on many aspects of MEXT's policy proposal, it should not be misinterpreted as a categorical rejection of the proposal itself as there are also positives that can be gleaned from this discussion. One cause for optimism is the general consensus at both the macro- and micro-levels that change is necessary if English instruction is to improve in Japan. Another is the general willingness of the micro-level study participants to make a genuine effort to perform their assigned roles to the best of their abilities.

Still, the onus is on MEXT to make sure that this is not a one-way process and be willing to work with teachers and administrators at the ground level to clear the many hurdles that undoubtedly lie ahead. If it sets the bar too high in terms of demands on the learner and instructor without offering adequate support, it could find itself running into larger problems as the policy moves from the current implementation stage and into the institutionalization stage (Wedell, 2003, p. 453). This paper's aim was to call attention to these potential

policy issues and make the case for open dialogue between the macro- and micro-levels throughout the policy implementation process.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions and Consolidated Participant Answers

Homeroom Teacher (HRT); Assistant Language Teacher (ALT); Specialized Language Teacher (SLT); Administrator (A). Answers have been consolidated to avoid duplicate entries, and cases where a participant did not feel confident or comfortable answering the questions have been omitted.

Do you understand the proposed policy changes, particularly as they pertain to elementary school English education? What areas, if any, are unclear?

- Unsure about the duties of specialized teacher. (A)
- Unsure about what skill level of language instruction. (A)
- Need more clarification on communicative skills. (HRT)
- Unsure of the level the curriculum is aiming for. (HRT)
- Unsure how the new system is going to impact the current curriculum. (HRT)
- Unsure of how elementary and secondary levels will connect. (SLT)
- Lacks understanding of the overall education system. (ALT)

Do you think that the current education policy needs to be changed? Do you agree with these specific measures? Why or why not?

- Need to address the gap between teacher and learner attitudes toward language learning. (A)
- Doubts that it is in the best interest of all students to begin studying English this early. (A)
- Need to increase instruction and formalize the learning process to raise learner skill level. (A)
- Need to address student inability to translate classroom learning into real world situations. (HRT)
- Need to develop more globally oriented students. (HRT)
- The current system does not give students language skills they can use in the future. (HRT)
- Yes, because Japan is falling further behind other Asian countries in terms of English proficiency. (SLT)

Do you feel that this policy schedule is realistic?

- Six years is probably not enough time to sufficiently train the HRTs. (A)
- Does not seem possible to procure the necessary amount of SLT staff and train the HRTs. (A)
- New teachers who have received training while at the university will be better prepared than current HRTs. (HRT)
- The average teacher will probably not be able to gain enough language skills by 2020. (HRT)
- It is difficult to tell at this early stage in the process. (SLT)

What kind of role do you feel you should be performing in order to implement the proposed policy?

- Coordinate training for local teachers, procure enough SLT staff to service the schools. (A)
- Procure necessary staff and establishing training programs at the local level. (A)
- Support the HRT's and staff in terms of training and motivation.(A)
- Keep a positive attitude despite the difficulties. (HRT)
- Under guidance of SLT, HRT should take a lead role in lesson planning, grading, materials development. (HRT)
- Taking responsibility for 30% of instruction for grades 5-6, particularly at the beginning of the school year. (SLT)
- Role will probably not change that much. (ALT)

How confident are you in your abilities to perform such a role? If you are unconfident, why?

- Can implement a plan from the national government, but we don't have the time or resources to make everything by ourselves. (A)
- Not confident in language abilities, especially pronunciation. (HRT)
- Unsure how to incorporate the English I do know into a lesson and instruct the students effectively. (HRT)
- Unsure about ability to balance the large demands already expected with the extra demands of language and instruction development. (HRT)
- I feel I can perform the SLT role because I have been able to work at both the elementary and junior school level, and have the necessary teaching and language abilities. (SLT)
- Yes, because my current role is not very demanding. (ALT)

What potential problems or obstacles can you foresee in the implementation of the proposed policy?

- There is a large gap in the way the HRTs learned English when they were in school and the way in which they will be expected to conduct lessons. (A)
- Performance gap between students/areas of economic disparity will worsen. (A)
- Free time is already being used to develop reading and math skills. (A)

- HRTs currently have too many other responsibilities to dedicate the necessary time to training. (HRT)
- Unsure how the current academic demands can be met along with proposed changes. (HRT)
- Worried that implementation will be forced through at the last minute. (HRT)
- Worried about the quality of teaching materials. (HRT)
- Skeptical about HRT attitudes and acceptance of policy, and worries about senior teachers not cooperating with younger SLTs. (SLT)

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the study participants and Dr. Sue Fraser Osada for her advice and constructive observations throughout the writing process.

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