

# Communicative Competence in High School? Really?

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Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) introduced a new English education curriculum in 2009 that took effect in the 2013-14 academic year at the senior secondary school level. The main educational objective of this new curriculum calls for the development of students' communicative competence. Several obstacles stand in the way of full implementation of this objective. In this paper I discuss the history and contemporary context of English education curriculum in Japan, as well as the numerous challenges facing the achievement of communicative competence at the high school level, including some directly attributable to MEXT's own institutional shortcomings. Although generally critical of the current situation, the paper concludes on a positive note and I suggest that communicative competence in Japan is achievable.

日本の文部科学省は2009年に高等学校で2013年から2014年度に施行された新学習指導要領を導入した。この新学習指導要領の主な教育的目標は、生徒のコミュニケーション能力の育成の必要性を唱えている。その目標を達成するにはいくつか問題点がある。本論文では日本の学習指導要領の沿革と現状を論じ、さらに文部科学省の制度的欠陥に直接起因すると思われる、高等学校レベルのコミュニケーション能力達成に向けて直面する数多くの課題についても論じていく。現況には概して批判的である一方、本論文は前向きな姿勢で締めくくり、また日本でのコミュニケーション能力は達成可能であることも示唆している。

**E**NGLISH EDUCATION has been a feature of the high school curriculum in Japan for more than 60 years. However, the goals of and approaches to teaching have varied over time. In its current incarnation, Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), by way of its once-in-a-decade curriculum guidelines entitled *The Course of Study for Senior High Schools*, states the overall objective of English education as follows: "To develop students' communication abilities . . . deepening their understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (MEXT, 2009, p. 1). In order to achieve these objectives "classes, in principle, should be conducted in English" (MEXT, 2009, p. 3).

This overall objective, along with its associated methodology, communicative language teaching, represents a significant change from prior approaches to English education. This paper will briefly discuss the history and development of English education in Japanese high school and then examine current conditions that produce both resistance to and growth potential for the new educational objectives as stated by MEXT. Teacher beliefs and practices in relation to the objective and suggested methodology will then be discussed. In the end, this paper will demonstrate that it may be

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possible to develop students' communicative competence, but several obstacles, including particular actions taken and not taken by MEXT itself stand in the way.

## Historical Perspective

Tahira (2012) provides a brief history of the Course of Study and the evolution of English education in Japan. Although English education was introduced in 1947, it wasn't until 1956 that it became a formal component of the Japanese secondary school curriculum. At that time, a vocabulary list of some 5,700 items was required to be taught by way of the audiolingual method. In the course of study that took effect post-occupation in 1961, Japan's unique hybrid version of the grammar-translation method, *yakudoku*, was introduced. This placed more emphasis on grammatical form and reduced the number of words to be taught to 4,900. In the period from the 1960s through the 1980's, while Japan experienced rapid economic growth and technological expansion, *yakudoku* continued to dominate English education teaching. However, the list of vocabulary to be learnt contracted to a mere 2,200 items under the 1989 incarnation of the course of study.

Although there is some disagreement amongst second language acquisition theorists as to the minimum vocabulary required to actively engage in English communication, it can be generally stated that a vocabulary size of 2,200 is insufficient (Nation, 1990). Although the 1989 course of study signalled a shift in educational objectives towards a more international stance, and mentioned the importance of communicative abilities, the limited wordlist and *yakudoku* remained for another two decades.

It was in the 1999 course of study that teaching and learning English *in English* (TEIE) was first suggested as a pedagogical priority and communicative language activities were introduced into the curriculum, in contrast to the *yakudoku* approach which was almost exclusively conducted in Japanese with an almost exclusive focus on

form (Nishino, 2008). In 2008 MEXT conducted a nationwide survey of upper secondary school teachers of English to ascertain the degree to which these guidelines were being followed. Of the nearly 19,000 respondents, approximately 8.5% reported that they were using English in the classroom "mostly," and of these over 90% were teaching either Oral Communication I or II, meaning that fewer than a single percent of teachers in charge of the other four courses included in the English curriculum, English I, English II, Reading, and Writing, were following MEXT guidelines (MEXT, 2008, as reported in Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011).

From these results, it was evident that the 1999 course of study guidelines had failed to take effect in most English classes in Japan, indicating that if MEXT intended to continue including communicative language activities as part of the guidelines, some changes would be necessary to facilitate implementation.

## The 2009 Course of Study

Before examining the changes mandated at the secondary school level, it is important to note that a significant change, first called for in a 2002 MEXT Action Plan, was mandated in the 2008 revised national curriculum for elementary schools that would have significant impact on secondary school English education as students progressed through the system. Under the previous curriculum, although many schools had locally developed programs of varying design, English education at the elementary level was not formalized (Wakita, 2013). With the revised curriculum, 35 hours per year were allocated in the fifth and sixth grades for "foreign language activities," and, according to MEXT's 2008 curriculum, "in principle, 'a foreign language' refers to English" (cited in Wakita, 2013, p. 5; Yamada & Hristoskova, p. 4). Most significantly, MEXT explicitly linked language education at the elementary level with upper level education in its final stated educational objective, "to foster a base for communication ability by experiencing English activities . . . in an integrated manner, which may create a link with future studies in junior high schools"

(cited in Wakita, 2013, p. 5). An action plan released in 2014 further expands this fundamental stage of language education by moving the above-described curriculum to third and fourth grades, whilst calling for an expanded and enhanced curriculum in the fifth and sixth grades (MEXT, 2014). Students who have studied under this new primary curriculum will not enter upper secondary (high) school until the 2016-2017 school year, so we will not be able to observe the full effects of the 2009 course of study for another 2 academic years. However, I have personally observed positive affective changes in my junior high school students, so I believe that we will soon be able to measure positive impacts of the new curriculum.

At the secondary level, the most notable change to the curriculum is the expanded vocabulary list. As noted above, the combined lower and upper secondary vocabulary list remained constant at 2,200 words for two decades. The 2009 course of study, which came into effect in 2012 in junior high and 2013 in senior high, contained the first increase in required vocabulary since English was introduced as a formal subject of study in Japan. Under the new curriculum, lower secondary vocabulary increased from 900 to 1,200 words and upper secondary from 1,300 to 1,800 words. (MEXT, 2011) Although arguably less than sufficient to achieve full communicative competence, this significant increase indicates an acknowledgement of a previous deficiency and an important step in the right direction.

The courses to be taught under the New Course of Study also represented a complete reworking of the curriculum. The previous Communication I and II, English I and II, Reading, and Writing were replaced with Basic Communication English, Communication English I, II, and III; English Expression I and II; as well as English Conversation. Curriculum content of all but the final of the new courses integrates the four language skills, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in a comprehensive manner, with learning objectives clearly centred around communicative skills of self-expression in both spoken and written form, inference, critical thinking, debate, and discussion (MEXT, 2009).

It is worth noting that the total number of credits in English education, both required and optional, did not change with the new Course of Study. Although schools were able to supplement the core curriculum with “in-house” elective courses, the core curriculum remained constant at 21 credits in total. In addition, the total number of credits required to graduate also remained constant at 74, with a mere two English credits listed as mandatory. Although nearly all high schools provide far more English education than the required two credits, the lack of mandatory English education may suggest that, despite strong language in support of foreign language education and internationalization, MEXT is not willing to back up this language with more deep and substantive policy changes.

When the New Course of Study for upper secondary schools was initially released to the public, the English section generated a great deal of controversy and confusion (Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011). Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) at my own school, like thousands across Japan, engaged in heated discussion about the confusing language that *inter alia* states

When taking into consideration the characteristics of each English subject, classes, in principle, should be conducted in English in order to enhance the opportunities for students to be exposed to English, transforming classes into real communication scenes. Consideration should be given to use English in accordance with the students’ level of comprehension. (MEXT, 2009, p. 3)

Although the policy stops short of prohibiting the use of the *yakudoku* method discussed above, the curriculum guidelines read like a communicative language learning and teaching wish list, within which *yakudoku* would be entirely inappropriate. The source of the confusion amongst JTEs can be traced to their educational backgrounds. Very few JTEs have formal training in second language teaching methodology and lack the pedagogical knowledge to design and implement a communicative syllabus (Browne & Wada,

1998). The ability to create these requisite “real communication scenes” was simply lacking.

In response to the confusion over the initial New Course of Study, MEXT issued a clarification in December of the same year to address the concerns raised. This clarification stated, in part,

The statement “classes, in principle, should be conducted in English” means that as teachers conduct class in English, students also use as much English as possible in class, and that by doing so, language activities in English are made the centre of instruction. This aims at enriching the opportunities for students to be exposed to English and for them to communicate in English in class. It ensures instruction that allows students to understand and express themselves directly in English. (Cited in Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011, p. 4, original in Japanese)

Unfortunately, this clarification did little to alleviate the confusion at the time, and the ambiguity of MEXT’s guidelines has left JTEs with a wide range of interpretations on the practical use on English in the language classroom (Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011). However, this is just one part of a larger problem that MEXT faces with adoption of its overall learning objective.

### MEXT: A Tiger with No Teeth

There are a number of factors that are inhibiting the full adoption of the MEXT curriculum objective of learners acquiring communicative competence, including the Course of Study’s legal standing within the educational infrastructure, teacher beliefs and practices, the Japanese learning environment, and certain policies and practices MEXT itself is engaged in, which I will now discuss in turn.

As the heading above implies, MEXT lacks the legal authority to control much of what goes on inside the classroom. In the landmark 1976 Ashikawa Achievement Test Case, the Supreme Court of Japan

established that the course of study is only a point of reference that describes general principles (Japan v. Sato et al., 1976). Because of this, teachers have very strong discretionary powers that the government can only mitigate through control of textbooks, an issue I will discuss later. For the present discussion, although individual discretionary power provides teachers with the ability to alter and customize their teaching practice in almost unlimited ways, this autonomy allows teachers to effectively ignore the guidelines and continue to teach what is commonly referred to as *juken eigo*—English for the sole purpose of performance on examinations that focus heavily on grammar, vocabulary, and reading—typically for the purpose of university entrance (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009).

A number of studies have investigated JTE beliefs in relation to the MEXT curriculum objectives in past courses of study (see Browne & Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2000, 2001; Hato, 2005; Nishino, 2009) and have identified several common factors that teachers cite in opposition to the implementation of communicative language teaching practices. Following the publication of the New Course of Study in 2009, Yamada & Hristoskova (2011) built upon previous studies and confirmed that many of the same factors that existed in the past continued to impede implementation of the MEXT objectives. Most notable amongst their findings was the lack of efficacy teachers perceived regarding communicative language teaching. There was doubt that students would accept teaching of this type as legitimate, doubt that communicative skills would be helpful in preparing students for future success, and doubt that communicative language teaching would be more effective than *yakudoku*. In general, they found that teachers simply did not buy into MEXT’s vision and were therefore more confident maintaining their traditional teaching practices.

Aspinall (2006) described a series of ethnographic studies in 1996 by Rohlen & LeTendre that delineated several features of the Japanese learning environment that impact negatively on a communicative approach to teaching English, which I will briefly summarize

here. Learners are generally expected to show deference and respect to both teachers and fellow students, which inhibits active participation, experimentation, and the formation of independent learning strategies. Within the learning environment specifically, and Japanese society generally, cultural norms tend to consider *showing off* in any manner a sign of rudeness. This causes both students inside the classroom, and teachers inside the meeting room, to be self-conscious and avoid displaying any particularly outstanding skill or knowledge. Even those teachers recently trained with the new curriculum objectives of communicative language teaching frequently revert to more traditional teaching methods for fear of standing out from their colleagues. Education is typically viewed as a top down system in which knowledge is transferred from those who possess it to those who do not. Teachers are considered experts, and learners are viewed as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge that the experts possess. The same can be said of the teacher hierarchical system. This causes a focus on form over function and creates a viewpoint in which a single correct or model answer is viewed as superior to variety and creativity.

Moreover, as Yamada and Hristoskova (2011) asserted, and I have personally observed, JTEs, although predominantly considered language teachers, are engaged in many aspects of student and school life in addition to their language teaching responsibilities. Many serve as homeroom teachers, and all are concerned with the future success of their students. Japanese educational advancement is generally based on success in paper-based tests that do not typically measure communicative competence. Because of this, teachers lack the confidence to teach communicative skills for fear of denying their students future success.

Several studies have investigated the English component of both MEXT's own National Center Test as well as supplementary university entrance exams (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Mulvey, 1999; Brown, 2002; Kikuchi, 2006; Guest, 2000, 2008) and conclude that JTEs' perceptions do not match the realities of the examinations

they are preparing students for. There is a general lack of understanding of the contents of current examinations, and a general tendency for teachers to prepare students for past examinations rather than future ones. MEXT has done a very poor job in effectively communicating to JTEs what skills future examinations will require, creating doubt that communicative competence will serve students well in their futures (Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011).

Further complicating the situation is the fact that textbooks approved and mandated by MEXT tend to be poorly aligned to both the National Center Test and MEXT's educational objective of communicative competence (Browne, 1998; Gorsuch, 1999; Underwood, 2010). This reality further complicates matters for JTEs, creating a situation whereby the three spheres of MEXT—the course of study, the National Center Test, and the textbook approval department—appear to have poor communication at best, and may in fact be competing with one another for power and influence (Glasgow & Paller, 2014).

A final aspect of MEXT's institutional behaviour is worth noting. Yamada & Hristoskova (2011) identified a strong interest in, and desire for, self-access professional development resources, which are severely lacking at present. Although MEXT has provided a large number of demonstration classes in all regions of the country, they have not actually provided much opportunity for JTEs to acquire new skills. Given that most teachers lack understanding of communicative language teaching methodology (see, for example, Gorsuch, 2001; Hato, 2005; Nishino, 2009; Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011), it seems a grievous disservice to simply provide opportunities for JTEs to observe demonstration lessons without equipping them with requisite abilities to carry out the MEXT objective of developing students' communication skills.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the role of native English speaking teachers (NESTs) in the language classroom. MEXT has recently suggested that they are considering a dramatic increase in the number of NESTs in Japan, specifically through the Japan Exchange

and Teaching (JET) Programme. Although JETs serve an important function in some respects, the vast majority lack educational training of any kind. JETs, and more generally Assistant Language Teachers, rarely serve as primary educators in the language classroom, and are frequently relegated to peripheral roles responsible for “fun and games.” The core curriculum delivery falls almost exclusively within the purview of the JTE (Aspinall, 2010). I would caution against simply increasing the number of NESTs and instead argue in favour of increasing the quality of this group. Rather than recruiting and hiring based solely on *native-speakerness*, focused recruitment on foreign campuses that offer undergraduate TESOL programs would, I believe, serve the objectives of MEXT much more effectively. This call from MEXT for more rather than better NESTs seems to reflect a more general policy approach that, like the drive to introduce English education at earlier stages of elementary school without addressing the lack of both training and qualified teaching professionals, indicates poorly planned policy.

## Conclusion

The New Course of Study (MEXT, 2009), which came into effect in the 2013-14 academic year, calls for students to achieve a high degree of communicative competence. In contrast to a past educational focus on form at the expense of function, students are now expected to develop self-expression, critical thinking, debate, and inference skills. However, the vast majority of Japanese teachers of English lack the skills to deliver communicative language lessons. MEXT appears to have put the cart before the horse, so to speak. Although expressing educational objectives contrary to those of the past, they have not provided necessary in-service teacher training, communicatively oriented textbooks and teaching materials, or clear information about what skills students will need to realize success on future university entrance examinations. In order to achieve the communicative goals MEXT has set, they must take concrete action to back up their objectives.

The brief overview contained in this paper suggests a number of research questions that interested scholars will likely pursue in the coming years. Several studies (e.g., Browne & Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 2001; Hato, 2005; Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Nishino, 2008, 2009; Yamada & Hristoskova, 2011) have looked at JTE perceptions and beliefs in relation to MEXT curriculum objectives, and a general consensus has emerged that there is a misalignment between government policy and teacher practice. Given the fact that this current academic year is the first in which the new curriculum has been fully implemented, I believe it is the ideal time to investigate the current state of affairs inside the language classroom.

## Bio Data

**Cory J. Koby** will complete his MA in ELT at the University of East London in December of 2015. He has been a secondary school English teacher in Sendai, Japan for the past 7 years, and is currently serving as JALT Sendai chapter president. His present research focuses on the attitudes and perceptions of Japanese secondary school teachers of English in light of recent curriculum changes, specifically investigating the viability of communicative language teaching in high school. <corykoby@gmail.com>

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