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The New Course of Study and the Possibilities for Change in Japan's English Education

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Introduction

The new courses of study for Japan's primary and secondary education were formally released by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (hereafter MEXT) in 2008 and 2009. One of the biggest changes has come in the area of English education, with English being included for the first time in the elementary school curriculum. The inclusion of English in elementary school should theoretically have a huge impact on the way English will be taught in junior and senior high schools. In this paper, we will look at the state of English education in Japan and the prospects the new course of study point to.

The state of Japanese English proficiency

The teaching of English in Japan has been a topic of concern for many years. The Japanese study English as their main foreign language for three years in junior high school, another three years in senior high school, and in the case of many people, at least another two years in university. Yet, when the results of the TOEFL are published by ETS, they persistently show the inefficiency and 'failure' of Japanese English education. Worse still, in terms of ranking in comparison with other Asian countries, the Japanese now find themselves with one of the lowest average scores among the peoples of Asia. It was found that, in the first year of the institution of the iBT (Internet Based Testing), the Japanese were 28th out of the 28 Asian countries from which examinees took the test. It was also found that the Japanese had the lowest average score in 'speaking' among the examinees from all 147 countries that took the iBT that year. (ETS, 2008). The results which came out in 2009 shows that the Japanese had the second lowest score in Asia, and still shared the lowest score in 'speaking' among all iBT examinees from around the world. (ETS, 2009)

However, the results of the TOEFL do not necessarily reflect the needs of the business community to conduct business in English—which is a more important need

for the Japanese community. The TOEIC is considered to be a better measure for this purpose, because it focuses on the ability to use English in international business situations. However, the results of the TOEIC are also not encouraging. The Japanese average score is again the lowest among those countries and regions where the TOEIC is administered. (cf. TOEIC Newsletter No. 89, Jan. 2005)

Why so poor in English?

In order to find a reason for why the results of these standardized tests are as low as they are, we now turn to the results of a questionnaire administered by Benesse Corporation to 4718 parents of children studying in elementary school. The results show that 55% of the respondents do not like English, 90% are not confident in using English, and most troubling of all for English teachers, 80% say that the English they learned in school has not been useful. At the same time, however, 55% say that they have had problems with English in the past. (Benesse, 2007)

If these results are any indication of the attitude towards English held by the general Japanese adult population, then it might be said that the inefficiency of English education is somehow related to the low scores on the proficiency tests which we have seen above.

What, then, is the problem with English education in Japan? The results of a survey conducted by the National Institute for Educational Policy Research in 2004 show that although 60% of the 1st year junior high school students say they like English, by the time they advance to 2nd year, the percentage drops by about 10%. Furthermore, 47% of the 3rd year students do not like English. More serious are the answers of the students to the question, 'Do you understand your English class?' The results show that although 55% of the 1st year students answer 'Yes', less than 50% of the 2nd year students understand their English classes very well, and by the time the students are in 3rd year, about 3 out of every 10 students say that they do not understand what is being taught in the English class. It was also found that the percentage of students who do not understand their English class was higher than any other subject the students were studying. (NIEPR, 2005)

These results suggest that one reason why Japanese adults have negative feelings about the English education they received in school—as we saw above—may have its roots in the English education they received in junior high school. In order to investigate the validity of this assumption, we will briefly look at the present system of English education in the secondary schools. Although the new course of study which includes the introduction of English at the elementary school will officially become

effective in 2011, under the present course of study, English education in Japan begins in junior high school. However, in junior high school there are only 3 hours of English per week, amounting to just 105 hours per year and 315 hours in three years. In these three years, teachers are expected to teach the basics of ‘communicating in English’ (mostly everyday conversation), as well as the basics of grammar and vocabulary, which are essential for the acquisition of the reading and writing skills. In other words, junior high school teachers have the unenviable job of getting their students to acquire not only the ability to ‘perform communicatively’ in English at the everyday conversational level (BICS) , but also to acquire enough ‘knowledge’ of the grammar of English necessary to read and write (CALP) within the small number of hours allotted for English education.

The results have shown the high failure rate of 3rd year junior high school students. This has further created a ‘gap’ between junior and senior high schools, forcing many senior high school teachers to teach ‘remedial English’ in the first year. As a result, the objectives set in the course of study for the senior high school English have not been met. Furthermore, the objectives set for optional English subjects, which usually have higher goals than the compulsory subjects, are hardly ever reached. For example, Oral Communication II requires students to be able to give their opinions, conduct discussions, debates and give presentations in English, but we can probably assume that 99% of the Japanese high school seniors cannot do these cognitively demanding communication activities.

The new course of study and its underlying assumption

As a consequence, MEXT has made important changes in the new courses of study with the development of the ability to use language for more cognitively demanding purposes (CALP) as the final goal. For example, the Central Education Committee has declared that the courses of study for all levels of primary and secondary education must place a strong emphasis on teaching children what they call ‘language ability’ (言語力) , defined as follows:

the ability to use language to deepen one’s capacity for thinking and communicating with others, on the basis of knowledge and experience, reasoning ability, and sensitivity and affection towards others. (言語力は、知識と経験、論理的思考、感性・情緒等を基盤として、自らの考えを深め、他者とコミュニケーションを行うために言語を運用するのに必要な能力を意味するものとする。)

Committee to Discuss Development of Language Ability 言語力育成協力者会議

Furthermore, in a directive issued by MEXT noting the essential changes made in the enforcement regulations of the revised Education Act, it specifically noted that for all subjects (not only English), an emphasis must be placed on the development of the ability to write reports, to think, to make judgments and express opinions logically. It further notes that the increase in the number of class hours for Japanese, social studies, science and English was implemented specifically for this purpose.

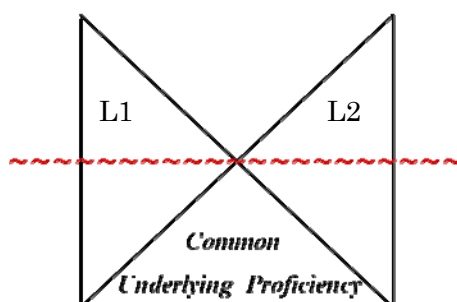
(学校教育法施行規則の一部を改正する省令の制定並びに幼稚園教育要領の全部を改正する告示、小学校学習指導要領の全部を改正する告示及び中学校学習指導要領の全部を改正する告示等の公示について (通知))

The important point to note here is that MEXT is emphasizing the development of a general ability to use language—both Japanese and English—as an essential step in raising the academic and educational level of the Japanese children.

This is an important development in terms of English education as well, because, until now, whenever people talked about ‘communication’, ‘presentation’, ‘discussion’ and ‘debate’, eyes were directed towards English education, where communicative ability is clearly stated in the objectives. The general hgas been, however, that English education has not lived up to these expectations—as can be seen the results of the tests and surveys mentioned above. The blame for the lack of the ability to conduct mature and logical communication and negotiation in international settings have always been placed on English education. However, the MEXT directive places the burden to use language for cognitive and academic purposes on all subjects—not only English.

As Cummins notes, in terms of cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP), the ability to conduct discussion, speech, negotiation and debate in one’s native language can transfer to the second or foreign language. (cf. Figure 1) In other words, the ability to use language logically and academically is seen to be universal, and this is expressed in the term Common Underlying Proficiency, which is assumed to be shared by both the native language (L1) and the second or foreign language (L2).

Figure 1. Cummins' Dual Iceberg Metaphor
The Existence of a Common Underlying Proficiency



(Baker & Hornberger, 2001; Cummins, 1984)

The assumption, therefore, in interpreting the objectives of the new courses of study in the area of foreign language (English) education, is that the same abilities must also be developed in the students' native language—Japanese—in all the subjects as well. With this in mind let us now look more specifically at the changes being proposed for English education itself.

Revisions in English education

One major revision can be seen in the introduction of English (foreign language) activities in elementary school. However, it must be understood that the purpose of English activities in elementary school is not to 'teach' English as a language system, but to provide opportunities for the pupils to communicate in English, without having to worry about learning grammar and memorizing vocabulary. The objective is to create a 'foundation' on which later 'structural and metalinguistic knowledge' of English can be based. In other words, the objective is to experience and raise an awareness of the cultural, communicative and linguistic differences which exist among the languages and cultures of the world through the medium of English. (Elementary School Course of Study)

Another important point to note is that even though English will be introduced in elementary school, the objectives for junior and senior high school English in the present course of study will basically remain the same. In other words, the purpose of introducing English in elementary school is not to raise the level of objectives for learning English in secondary schools, but to provide a better foundation for the students to reach the goals and objectives which already exist—but very few have been able to reach. The present goals and objectives are assumed to be basically appropriate, but the fact that so few students are able to reach them is seen as the problem.

For example, in the present course of study, the number of new words to be

introduced in junior high school is 900. However, in the new course of study, the number has been increased to 1200. At first sight, it might look as though the level of English in junior high school has been raised. However, in actuality, the number of words assumed to be used in elementary school to conduct English activities is considered to be about 300, and these words are included in the 1200 words to be taught in junior high school. In other words, the introduction of 900 new vocabulary items in junior high school has not changed. The remaining 300 words are assumed to have been learned already in elementary school.

Another important revision can be seen in the changes in the English subjects to be taught in senior high school. Presently, the English subjects in senior high school are Oral Communication I and II, English I & II, Reading, and Writing. Although English I & II are supposedly ‘integrated skills’ courses which require the teacher to teach them using multiple skills, in reality, most teachers treat these subjects as if they were meant for grammar-translation instruction. The main reason why English I & II are treated this way is because of the existence of Oral Communication I (BICS level everyday conversation) & Oral Communication II (CALP level presentation, discussion and debate). Many teachers tend to think that the use of English as a medium of instruction is the responsibility of Oral Communication, and since Oral Communication is very often taught by Assistant Language Teachers (mostly native speakers of English), they feel that they themselves do not have to use English to conduct their classes.

Therefore, in order to remedy this situation, the new course of study introduces Communication English I, II and III as the main subjects, with English Expression I & II as optional subjects emphasizing the self-expression skills of presentation, discussion, debate, and writing. There will also be an optional subject called Communication English-Basic whose objective is to bridge the gap that presently exists between junior and senior high school. Also, despite the efforts of the curriculum supervisors of MEXT and the committee members of the foreign language sub-committee of the Central Education Committee to do away with the distinction between Oral Communication and English I & II, ‘English Conversation’ is included as an optional subject in the curriculum. This is unfortunate because, 1) high school English teachers might again relegate the use of English to the English Conversation course and teach Communication English in the same way they have been teaching English I & II in the present curriculum, and 2) it goes against the basic philosophy of the new course of study which is to concentrate on everyday English conversation (BICS) in the elementary and junior high school level, and to put more emphasis on cognitively demanding (CALP) communication activities in senior high school and university.

In order to see how changes in cognitive load can be defined, let me introduce Bloom's Cognitive Educational Objectives. (cf. Bloom, 1956)

1. *Knowledge*: memorizing and recalling information (names of objects, etc.)
2. *Comprehension*: understanding the meaning of the knowledge learned.
3. *Application*: Using learned information in novel situations in and out of the classroom

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4. *Analysis*: Separating material or concepts into component parts in order to understand its organizational structure.
 5. *Synthesis*: Building a structure or pattern from diverse elements, and creating a new meaning or structure.
 6. *Evaluation*: Making judgments and taking a stand about the value of ideas or materials.

According to this hierarchy of cognitive objectives, the first three are considered to be relatively superficial (BICS), whereas the last three are considered more cognitively demanding (CALP). In other words, up to junior high school, the emphasis is on acquiring everyday conversational exchanges and simple pieces of information, but from senior high school, conversational exchanges become more cognitively demanding, and the content becomes more difficult as well as.

Senior High School English and its educational objectives

Let us now take a look at some of the objectives and content of the new senior high school course of study. I will compare the contents of Communication English I with those of Communication English II, and the contents of English Expression I with those of English Expression II. You will see that the emphasis in senior high school is very much on the development of CALP, as well as on the ability to express oneself in English. But first of all, let me begin with the overall objective for senior high school English education:

To develop students' communicative ability to accurately understand information and ideas, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (外国語を通じて、言語や文化に対する理解を深め、積極的にコミュニケーションを図ろうとする態度の育成を図り、情報や考えなどを的確に理解したり適切に伝えたりするコミュニケーション能力を養う。)

New Senior High School Course of Study (高等学校学習指導要領)

The concrete and detailed contents of this overall objective are as follows. We will look at the detailed objectives as they are given in Communication English I and II, and English Expression I and II. Notice the developmental differences among these subjects. We will first look at Communication English I and II.

In terms of listening skills, whereas in Communication English I the ability to listen to *introduction of objects and dialogues* (事物に関する紹介や対話などを聞いて), is emphasized, in Communication English II, the ability to listen to *dialogues and debates* (対話や討論などを聞いて), is emphasized. In other words, there is a development from listening to and comprehending *simple pieces of information to more complicated discourse*. This corresponds to Bloom's educational objectives, making Communication English II a more cognitively demanding subject than Communication English I.

In reading skills, whereas in Communication English I, the ability to read *descriptions and narratives* (説明や物語などを読んで) is emphasized, in Communication II, the ability to read not only descriptions and narratives, but also, *critiques and essays* (説明, 評論, 物語, 随筆), is emphasized, and the *flexibility* to read *extensively or intensively, according to the objectives of reading* (速読したり精読したりするなど目的に応じた読み方) is also an important goal. Again, we see that Communication English II is cognitively more demanding than Communication English I.

In the same way, if we look at the speaking skills, whereas Communication English I targets the ability to *discuss and exchange opinions* (話し合ったり意見の交換をしたりする), Communication English II *discuss and reach conclusions* (話し合うなどして結論をまとめる).

Finally, in the writing skills, whereas Communication English I aims at developing the ability to *write succinctly* (簡潔に書く), Communication English II aims at developing the ability to *write coherently* (簡潔に書く).

As can be seen from the above comparison, for each skill, Communication English II posits cognitively higher educational objectives than Communication English I. The problem, however, is this. Although it seems that the contents set for Communication English I seems attainable, the contents of Communication English II look formidable. Are they realistic goals to aim for?

If we further look at the contents of the optional subjects English Expression I and II, we see that the aims look even more difficult to attain.

For example, in terms of the speaking skill, English Expression I aims at developing the ability to *speak spontaneously and concisely* (即興で話す....簡潔に話す),

but for English Expression II the aims are to be able to *speak spontaneously, sort and arrange content and speak logically* (即興で話す。また、伝えたい内容を整理して論理的に話す).

For reading, English Expression I has as its goal the ability to *write concisely* (簡潔に書く) according to given objectives and needs of the reader, English Expression II aims at the ability to *decide on a theme* (主題を決め) and the ability to *write in various genres* (様々な種類の文章を書く).

Furthermore English Expression I's goal is to get students to *give presentations* (発表する), whereas in English Expression II the goal is to *ask questions, and give own opinion* (質問したり意見を述べたりする).

In English Expression II, students will also become capable of *taking a stand and exchange arguments to persuade the other person* (立場を決めて意見をまとめ、相手を説得する).

English Expression I also emphasizes the learning of *specific skills such as presentations* (発表の仕方や発表のために必要な表現), whereas English Expression II emphasizes the actual use of what one has learned about methods and language used in *presentations and debates* (発表の仕方や討論のルール).

Finally, in English Expression I students will learn to *sort and arrange similarities and differences from other opinions* (意見を他の意見と比較して共通点や相違点を整理したり), and put together one's own idea, and in English Expression II students will learn to *respect other people's point of view and ideas, and by considering both positions* (相手の立場や考えを尊重し、互いの発言を検討して) expand one's own way of thinking and utilize the ideas in *resolving issues* (課題の解決に向けて考えを生かし合う).

If we look at these objectives and goals, we can see that senior high school English has as its goals, cognitively demanding educational objectives as seen in Bloom's model. However, there will probably be some people who might criticize these sophisticated and high-level objectives. How many of our high school students can we really expect to attain the levels stipulated in the course of study? The Super English Language High Schools where communicative activities have been employed and experimented with are probably some of the very few high schools where CALP level communicative activities are to some extent possible. In fact, some people will also note that Japanese high school students are incapable of implementing the above activities even in their native language, Japanese.

Importance of the development of a more general ‘language ability’

The detailed objectives of the new course of study are very high, even in term so of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) criteria (Yoshida & Fujii, 2009). However, we must not forget the basic assumption on which these objectives are created. As was noted earlier, MEXT assumes that these CALP level linguistic activities will be implemented in ALL subjects—not just English—from elementary school to senior high school. If this is done, then the possibility of reaching these goals is not necessarily an unreachable dream.

In fact, an English teacher of the high school which won the All Japan High School English Debating Championships in 2008 told me of the difficulties he had in getting his students to practice debating in English, until the Japanese language teacher began to introduce debating in his Japanese language class. Once the students began practicing debating in Japanese, the teacher said the students also developed their English debating skills much more easily than before.

Conclusion

In sum, the new course of study is unique in that the basic assumption of the importance of developing ‘language ability’ underlies all subjects, regardless of the language used in teaching them. If the MEXT directive is followed, and teachers of all subjects at all levels of education train their students to use language for cognitively demanding purposes (CALP), then the possibility of Japanese high school students to use English for higher levels of cognitive functioning is not an unrealizable goal.

A more important question which will come next is, will Japanese universities be able to provide the kind of education which utilizes the English proficiency high school students will assumedly come equipped with?

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