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Current MEXT Policies and Goals: The New Course of Study for Elementary Schools

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1. What is the Course of Study

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2011a) determines the Course of Study as “broad standards for all schools... to ensure a fixed standard of education throughout the country” (p. 1). Although there is some debate (Matsubara, 2012), MEXT regards the Course of Study as legally binding standards (MEXT, 1992). It has been revised approximately once every ten years. The current Course of Study for elementary schools was revised in March 2008 and fully implemented in April 2011. Likewise, the new Course of Study was revised in March 2017 and will be fully implemented in April 2020.

The process of revision is that chief Minister of MEXT first consults the Central Council for Education, which is an advisory organization, composed of 30 members, which reviews and discusses important matters regarding the promotion of education, lifelong learning and sports (MEXT, 2001a). Accommodating the consultation from MEXT, the council has meetings and releases the content of their opinions. Thereafter, they invite public opinions and then submit a report. Subsequently, the draft of the revision of the Course of Study is released. Again, they invite public opinions. Finally, Minister of MEXT officially announces the revised version of the Course of Study.

2. The Current Course of Study for Elementary and Junior High Schools

Before the new Course of Study, the current Course of Study is going to be under discussion. As stated above, the one for elementary schools was revised in 2008 and fully implemented in 2011. In this Course of Study, an overhaul of ‘Yutori

Education’, which means ‘education free from pressure’ was conducted.

The objective of these revisions was to cultivate a ‘zest for life’ which consists of solid academic ability, richness in humanity, and sound body (MEXT, 2011c). Correspondingly, the revisions focused on enhancement of the capabilities to recognize problems and think, make better decisions, and express oneself, as well as acquisition of knowledge and skills (MEXT, 2011c). In order to achieve the aims, the number of classes was increased and the educational contents were enhanced (MEXT, 2011c). Behind this change, there was a drop of the Japanese students’ results on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) conducted by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

In year 2000, Reading literacy ranked 8th, Mathematical literacy ranked 1st and Scientific literacy ranked 2nd of 27 OECD member countries. The results slightly dropped in 2003, 12th, 4th and 2nd of 29 member countries respectively. The results of year 2006 also slightly dropped. Although Reading literacy kept the same rank 12th of, Mathematical literacy became 6th of 30 countries and Scientific literacy ranked 3rd of 30 countries (MEXT, 2008c). In response to the results, MEXT shifted its supported for Yutori education and moved to give it up.

The current Course of Study aims to “nurture in students ‘zest for life’ based on the educational principles” (MEXT, 2008a, p.1). The overall objective of MEXT’s (2008b, p. 1) English lessons in the current Course of Study is as follows:

To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages while developing the understanding of language and cultures through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages.

MEXT (2008b, p. 1) explains how to “form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities” in the subsequent section of the practical guide of the Course of Study:

1. Instruction should be given on the following items in order to help pupils

actively engage in communication in a foreign language:

- (1) To experience the joy of communication in the foreign language.
- (2) To actively listen to and speak in the foreign language.
- (3) To learn the importance of verbal communication.

Thus, it appears that MEXT (2008b) focuses on speaking and listening rather than writing and reading in the current Course of Study.

Main changes for elementary schools regarding English education are as below;

1. The number of classes and educational contents

- (1) Two classes per week in the grades one and two, one class per week in the grades three to six were added.
- (2) Japanese, Social Studies, Arithmetic, Science and P.E. classes were boosted by ten percent.

Such increase of the numbers of classes and enhancement of educational contents were made in order for children to “acquire fundamental knowledge and skills, foster ability to think, make decisions and express themselves to solve problems by using acquired knowledge and skills, cultivate motivations to learn and foster good study habits” (MEXT, 2016b, p. 8).

In addition to these changes, ‘foreign language activities’ was introduced as an enhancement of the foreign language education. It used to be included in the period for integrated learning, so called ‘sougotekina gaokushu no jikan’, which started from fiscal year of 2000. However, in this revision of the Course of study, foreign language activities became independent of the period for integrated learning.

1. Foreign language activities for third to sixth grade students

- (1) English predominant focus in elementary grades five and six, resulting 35 English classes per year.
- (2) English conversation classes in the period for integrated learning were set in elementary grades three and four although the number of classes were not specified.

Since MEXT emphasizes the importance of the cooperation between elementary and junior high schools (Yamaoka, 2009), it seems to be important to consider the features of the Course of Study for junior high schools. There were also remarkable changes from previous version. Main changes for junior high schools in terms of English are as follows;

1. The number of classes and educational contents
 - (i) One classes per week in each grade year was added, which resulted in four classes a week.
 - (ii) Japanese, Social Studies, Arithmetic, Science and Health / P.E. classes were boosted by ten percent.

One of them is the number of the classes as with elementary schools. Accordingly, the contents were increased. Another change is that the vocabulary goal was boosted.

It also focuses on balanced learning of four skills.

2. Enhancement of the foreign language education
 - (1) Vocabulary goal of 1200 words, which increased by 300 words from 900 (in addition to elementary school words, which is not specified).
 - (2) It stresses the need to integrate 4 skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) in one class.

2.1 The New Course of Study for Elementary Schools

Keeping these in mind, the next focus is on the Course of Study for elementary schools, which was revised in 2017 and will be fully implemented in 2020. In revising the Course of Study for the first time in ten years, the Central Council for Education (2016b) set the aim of realizing a ‘curriculum open to society’ in order to make suitable national curriculum standards for a new era. Furthermore, the Council worked on implementing ‘proactive, interactive and deep learning’ to identify competencies that will be required in the future (MEXT, 2016c). Simultaneously, the Council also worked on enhancing curriculum management.

Putting these principles as a core, the new Course of Study aims to foster attributes and abilities composed of three elements. According to MEXT (2014), three

concepts consist of ‘what to be acquired’, ‘what to learn’ and ‘how to learn’. They explain in further about these concepts. Regarding ‘what to be acquired’, there are three important competences needed for the new age. First one to be developed is ‘knowledge and skills’, which can also be useful in society. This does not refer to only individual facts, but something linked with the existing facts. Another is ‘capacity for thought, judgment and expression’, which is the ability to use these knowledge and skills in unfamiliar situations and cope with the situations. The final competency is ‘motivation to learn and humanity’, which is the ability to apply learning to their lives and society.

In terms of ‘what to learn’, it is connected to the changes of foreign language education. For the third and fourth graders, foreign language activities (as a part of the period for integrated learning) are to be implemented. They have 35 lessons a year, focus is on listening and speaking skills. On the other hand, for fifth and fourth graders, who have 70 lessons a year, English learning is no longer labeled ‘foreign language activities’ but it becomes an official subject, ‘English’. In foreign language activities, focus is only on listening and speaking.

However, in English as a subject, all listening, speaking, reading and writing are focused in the same manner as junior and senior high school English education. Furthermore, in the new Course of Study, the remarkable change is that ‘speaking’ is divided into two parts: interaction and production. Therefore, teachers must evaluate their English ability with the four skills evaluation criteria. Thus, the criteria, listening, speaking, reading and writing will become five skills: listening, speaking (interaction), speaking (production), reading and writing, which is exactly same as the new Course of Study for junior and senior high schools, which will be fully implemented in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

As for ‘how to learn’, the new Course of Study emphasizes proactive, interactive and deep learning, so called ‘Active Learning’. It also puts emphasis on the quality and the depth of learning, not just only knowledgeable but also the learning that makes it possible to discover issues, resolve proactively and collaboratively and present the result in the actual life and the real world.

Regarding the now Course of Study for English (MEXT, 2016c, p. 67), the overall

objective of English lessons for elementary school fifth graders and sixth graders is as follows;

To foster the foundation of pupils' communication abilities through listening, reading, speaking and writing activities in foreign languages by making use of pupils' points of view to communicate in foreign languages.

MEXT (2016c) also states detailed aims in its practical guide of the Course of Study as below;

- (1) To notice the difference between Japanese and foreign languages such as sounds, letters, vocabulary, expressions, sentence structure and language function of foreign languages. To understand this, and becoming familiarized with listening, speaking, reading and writing, forming the fundamental skills that can be utilized in actual communication. (p. 69)
- (2) To foster the foundational strength necessary to exchange thoughts and feelings through listening and talking about familiar and simple matters in accordance with the purpose, setting, situation as well as reading and guessing the meanings of familiar foreign vocabulary and basic expressions and writing while conscious of word order that they become familiar with through listening activities. (p. 71)
- (3) Deepening the understanding of the culture behind foreign languages and paying attention to others, to develop an attitude to communicate using foreign languages subjectively. (p. 72)

Along with the process of the revision of the Course of Study, MEXT introduced the English education reform plan corresponding to globalization. As a part of English education reform, MEXT (2016c) made the frameworks for new English education that consist of many elements as follows:

1. Empower teachers in elementary school
 - (1) create measures for the additional posting and training of English education promotion leaders in elementary school
 - (2) improve teaching skills of specialized English course teachers
 - (3) improve English teaching skills of elementary school class teachers

- (4) develop and provide audio teaching materials for training
- (5) improve teacher training program and teacher employment
- 2. Empower teachers in lower/upper secondary school
 - (1) Nurture English education promotion leaders in lower/upper secondary school
 - (2) Improve teaching skills of lower/upper secondary school English subject teachers
 - (3) Utilize external language exams to periodically inspect English levels of achievement for teachers posted within each prefecture
- 3. Promoting utilization of external staff
 - (1) expand placement of Assistant Language Teachers (ALT)
 - (2) promote utilization of community members (formulate guidelines for such external staff use, etc.)
 - (3) strengthen and enrich ALT training programs
- 4. Developing guidance teaching materials
 - (1) prepare teaching materials for early implementation
 - (2) develop and prepare Information and Communication Technology teaching materials for module classes (p. 1)

It appears to involve a significant cost to fulfill the framework and accomplish the aims of the new Course of Study. However, no information has been found yet about the approved budget for new English education, which will be promoted vigorously from fiscal year 2014. As a step for advanced implementation of the new Course of Study between year 2018 and 2020, MEXT demonstrated how these changes can be realized as a “transition towards the smooth implementation of the new Course of Study in foreign language education” (General Union, n.d., p. 1). The followings are the transition measures in chronological order.

- 1. Fiscal year 2018 (April 2018 – March 2019)
 - (1) Sixth graders; English classes increase from 35 to 50 lessons per year.
 - (2) Fifth graders; the same as sixth graders.
 - (3) Fourth graders; English classes increase from 0 to 15 lessons per year.

(4) Third graders; the same as fourth graders.

2. Fiscal year 2019 (April 2019 – March 2020)

(1) Sixth graders; English classes increase from 50 to 75 lessons per year.

(2) Fifth graders; the same as sixth graders.

(3) Fourth graders; English classes increase from 15 to 35 lessons per year.

(4) Third graders; the same as fourth graders.

In the new Course of Study for English, foreign language activities to fifth and sixth grade students are becoming an official subject, ‘English’. They learn English twice a week. On the other hand, third and fourth grade students will have foreign language activities once a week as compulsory English lessons as is the case with the fifth and sixth graders at this moment. As shown above, the number of compulsory English classes for grade six and five are going to be double in fiscal year 2020, while those for grade four and three are going to be more than double.

3. ELT Textbooks for Elementary Schools Published or Authorized by MEXT

As stated earlier, English teaching was introduced in the form of “foreign language activities” to fifth and sixth graders and compulsory English lessons were set to start once a week at the beginning of 2011. At this moment, the study of English in elementary schools is not regarded to be an official subject in the same way as Japanese, Mathematics, or Science. Therefore, English textbooks are different from those for other subjects’, which teachers must use and teach all contents from these textbooks. Teachers can, though not compulsory, use them as supplementary materials for their English lessons. Furthermore, there is no obligation for them to be authorized by MEXT.

Under such circumstances, English teaching material *Eigo Note* was developed by MEXT (2009) for the use during fiscal year of 2009 to 2011. It was the first English textbook for Japanese elementary school English education. Since there was no generic textbook for the use in foreign language activities, MEXT (2012c) published *Eigo Note* “in order to provide an equal opportunity for education, to secure a smooth transition from elementary to junior high school, as well as to secure quality standards for foreign language activity classes” (p. 1).

Ahead of the publication of *Eigo Noto*, MEXT set up an advisory board and held meetings. MEXT also conducted a survey about English education in elementary schools involving fourth and sixth grade children, their parents and teachers at 190 schools in June 2004. However, none of these published studies dealt with any evaluation of the textbook contents and up to the present time, no research of this kind has been found by the present researcher. Therefore, no clear rationale has been offered at this time to explain how and why contents including vocabulary and grammar in English materials of MEXT were selected.

As revised textbooks of *Eigo Noto*, MEXT published *Hi, friends!* (MEXT, 2012a, 2012b) for use during academic years from 2012 to 2017. MEXT (2012c) explained why they introduced *Hi, friends!*, stating that the materials were introduced to further enhance foreign language activities at elementary schools starting from April 2012. In terms of evaluation of the textbook contents, MEXT does not seem to mention any clear rationale for the selection of the contents. However, it is revealed that 88 per cent of the vocabulary found in *Hi, friends!* overlaps with the vocabulary that appears in six different junior high school textbooks authorised by MEXT (Haruoka, 2013).

When *Hi, friends!* was in use, predominant focus was on speaking and listening skills. On the other hand, writing and reading skills were not apparently taught so that students could enjoy communication through English. In 2017, based on the changes in the new curriculum and in order to support it, the Ministry of Education published the latest series of textbooks, *Let's try!* (MEXT, 2018a, 2018b) for grades three and four, and *We can!* (MEXT, 2018c, 2018d) for grades five and six for the use during the transitional period from 2018 to 2019. These were the replacements of the previous elementary school textbooks, *Hi, friends!*, which were used during academic year of 2012 to 2017.

For the third and fourth grade students, English lessons are regarded as a part of the period for integrated learning, not as an official subject. Therefore, their focus is on listening and speaking skills as it was for fifth and six graders until 2017. However, in the new curriculum, English lessons for fifth- and sixth-year students are regarded as an official subject and their focus is on four skills: not only listening and speaking but reading and writing. Since English education in elementary

schools is expected to establish the foundation of English learning in junior high school (Z-Kai, 2018), there could be a significant connection between elementary and junior high school English learning contents. There is further research expected in the future.

According to the changes in the new Course of Study, *We can!* took over the contents of *Hi, friends!* As for fifth and sixth graders, they learn higher-level English subsequent to the changes. During the last two year's transitional period, in 2018 and 2019, the new Course of Study is carried out advanced implementation using the four textbooks which are published by MEXT. *Let's try! 1* (MEXT, 2018a) is used for third graders, *Let's try! 2* (MEXT, 2018b) is for fourth graders. Likewise, *We can! 1* (MEXT, 2018c) is for fifth graders and *We can! 2* (MEXT, 2018d) is for sixth graders. Because of the advanced implementation, elementary school teachers are expected to use these textbooks and evaluate students' speaking skills from two aspects: interaction and production, without waiting for MEXT authorized textbooks that will be released just before the fully implementation of the new Course of Study in April 2020. Teachers are also expected to achieve the aims of MEXT using the textbooks.

Thus, MEXT published textbooks are used in elementary schools (not as compulsory) right up to the present. However, since English will be upgraded to an official subject, publishers make textbooks and MEXT authorize these. Seven out of seven textbooks for elementary school English classes were authorized in March 2019 (MEXT, 2019). For the next academic year, local boards of education will decide which textbook to use in their local schools.

3.1 The Importance of Analysing Textbooks

Under such circumstances stated in the previous section, analyzing the current textbooks can lead to the further research of new textbooks which will be published by publishers as well as be valuable to elementary school teachers. From a global point of view, my research can impact other countries that have similar English teaching and learning situations. Therefore, the analysis of textbooks in order to identify their strengths and weaknesses will be strongly necessary. Especially, the analyses that are based on the objectives of the new Course of Study, focusing on the two aspects of speaking, seems to be vitally essential.

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Abstract

The paper summarizes the recent developments in language policy for elementary school learners of English in Japan. MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) revises educational policy on a regular basis and in recent years has extended English education to elementary school years. The most recent Course of Study was revised in March 2017 and will be fully implemented in April 2020.

Keywords: elementary school, MEXT policy, early language learning, textbook analysis