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MEXT Policies and Learning Experience: Lifelong Learners of Languages other than English¹

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1. Introduction

Our rapidly globalized society might provide us with lots of possibilities in terms of wellbeing, job opportunities, and prosperity of a country's economy. At the same time, we are experiencing an aging society with fewer children and we are aware of the importance of lifelong learning for everyone. Dozza (2017) summarized the importance of having the possibility of lifelong learning from the early stages of life to be continued throughout life, although when talking about lifelong learning, we generally treat it as if lifelong learning begins when one finishes school, in adulthood or at a senior age. Dewey (1938, Japanese trans. 2004) indicates that school days' knowledge and subjects are to be relearnt in a different manner and attitude, to continue studying and learning from your own experience other than through formal schooling.

The aim of our research is to maximize some motivational factors like the benefits of lifelong learning, the need of seniors to be meaningfully involved in society and their potential as social agents in second language learning for seniors. We use a language-for-specific-purposes approach, namely a course to become volunteer tourist guides in Spanish in order to make the best use of the seniors' life-experience, knowledge and motivation (Shibuya, 2018). In the 2018 spring semester, we conducted a pilot course in Spanish. We asked the participants to fill a preliminary questionnaire in order to know the students' background, such as their

¹ This paper is based on a panel presentation at the second International Bilingualism Conference held at the University of Malta in March of 2019.

experiences in studying foreign languages, volunteering, working, and social activities as well as their motivation and expectations for the Spanish pilot course.

In general, most of the learners' foreign language learning experiences should have been influenced by the educational policy of the country from their childhood throughout secondary school. Therefore, reviewing how the foreign language education policy followed by the Ministry's guidelines evolved in their target language might tell us how it will influence students' mastery of their target language and link to their profession using foreign languages. Therefore, firstly in this paper, language policies for foreign languages other than English in Japan are discussed, by referring to mainly the recent implementation of the Course of Study Guidelines by MEXT.

2. MEXT policy for learning foreign languages other than English

This section compares the current Course of Study Guidelines with the new version of them in elementary schools, junior high schools, as well as senior high schools. Current MEXT Course of Study Guidelines for elementary schools (MEXT, 2010a) include the so-called *gaikokugo katsudo* (foreign language activities) for the 5th and the 6th grade students. These guidelines are supposed to provide students with more communication chances using foreign languages as well as experiencing both Japanese and foreign cultures through the instructions in order to “form the foundation of pupils' communication abilities” through foreign languages.

The new MEXT guidelines (2017a) specify that, for elementary schools, a transitional measure will be taken for foreign language activities at the 3rd and 4th grades (p. 6), establishing a *gaikokugo ka* (Foreign languages or English as a subject) for the 5th and 6th grades (p. 62). Also, according to MEXT (2017a), instruction for foreign languages other than English should follow the Objectives, Contents, and Lesson Plan designed for each subject as stated in English (p. 136) and English should be selected as the foreign language in elementary schools (p. 137). It seems that English is considered to be the priority foreign language at all levels of education in Japan. These new guidelines allow elementary school children to start foreign language activities at an earlier age than currently, and this could be an interesting opportunity for children to start learning and encounter foreign languages and cultures without feeling the exam pressure.

When we focus on current MEXT Course of Study Guidelines for junior high schools, foreign languages other than English are mentioned in a paragraph that states, “Instruction for foreign languages other than English should follow the objectives and contents of English instruction” (MEXT 2008a, p. 8; MEXT 2008b, p. 65). Here they use the word “English” to explain the Objectives and Contents for each subject.

A comparison table for the Course of Study Guidelines for foreign languages in junior high schools (MEXT, 2017b, pp. 192-193) shows no major changes in the new MEXT Course of Study Guideline for junior high schools as described for foreign languages other than English in MEXT (2008a, p. 8) and MEXT (2008b, p. 65). However, it is mentioned that students should study English as the main foreign language. A one-size-fits-all approach seems to be applied here.

Along the same lines, current MEXT Course of Study Guidelines for senior high schools indicate that “Instruction for foreign languages other than English should follow the Objectives and Contents for each subject stated in I. through VII. and Article 3” (MEXT, 2009a, p. 5; MEXT 2009b, pp. 32-33). It also describes the importance of the communicative way of instruction and of fostering communication skills as highlighted for English and then, the following comment is added: If students are going to take a foreign language other than English for the first time at a senior high school, appropriate consideration is required to deal with basic language materials and to conduct language activities according to the students’ proficiency level (MEXT 2009b, pp. 32-33).

The new MEXT Course of Study Guidelines for senior high schools (MEXT, 2018a), that will be effective in 2022, note that Instruction for foreign languages other than English should follow the Objectives and Contents for each subject stated in English (p. 239). Hence, there is no major change of the policy in foreign languages other than English. Section 8, Other Foreign Languages (MEXT, 2018a, p. 216), mentions that through the activity of integrating Listening, Reading, Speaking, and Writing skills, students should be encouraged to have the ability of communicating. Here, the importance of the communicative approach in other foreign languages is highlighted in the same way as for English.

According to Chapter 1, Background of revision and basic policy and 2. Purpose and gist of revision of foreign languages as a subject (MEXT, 2018b), the following is the current situation: Today's cohort of children is part of a declining population of productive age, and will face the continuous development of technology, such as AI (Artificial Intelligence) or IoT (Internet of Things). As well, in 2022, the age of adulthood will be lowered to 18 years old. High school students are expected to be more involved in politics and society (MEXT, 2018b, pp. 3-4). In our globalizing society, communication in foreign languages is not limited only to a certain domain or professions anymore (MEXT, 2018b, p. 6). These imply that foreign language education will and should link to students' lifelong learning opportunity and professions.

3. Foreign language other than English in senior high school

Second foreign language education mainly starts at the university level in Japan, although some senior high schools also start foreign languages other than English. MEXT (2016) shows that Chinese, Korean, French, Spanish, and German are the major languages as a subject of foreign languages other than English that are studied in senior high schools in Japan between 1999 and 2016. The number of senior high schools holding classes in foreign languages other than English totaled 551 in 1999. After the peak (790 senior schools) in 2007, it has been slightly decreasing every year, and resulted in a total of 677 schools in 2016 (p. 13). French has ranged between 206 and 268 schools in the list from 1999 to 2009. In 2016, the total number of senior high school holding French was 209. This is a very small pie for language activities considering that the number of senior high schools in Japan was 4925 in 2016 (MEXT 2018c, table 21).

When focusing on some problems in the second foreign language education in senior high school, Yamashita (2016) noted the difficulty of finding qualified teachers and the large class size after it became mandatory to learn a foreign language other than English. As a consequence, some students choose their foreign languages without a clear objective (pp. 231-232). According to Mizuguchi & Hasegawa (2016), the standard textbooks for senior high schools are not yet organized (p. 182) and teacher training courses in foreign languages other than English are limited (p. 184).

On the other hand, there are some proposed solutions. Oiwa (2012) shows positive correlation between English reading and French study through university students' TOEIC test results and using results of Test in Practical French Proficiency. This means that knowledge resources of previously acquired English structure and vocabulary might promote the mastery of French (p. 88). Kishida (2018) conducted an intensive Spanish language education course for senior high school students for 40 hours, entirely in Spanish. From the questionnaire of learners, there were positive comments about listening in Spanish. As well, not only their Spanish, but also their English showed the positive influence from such an intensive course, in that less grammatical mistakes were reported. Through these researches, it seems that starting the second foreign language learning at least at the senior high school level might help their language knowledge and motivation that could be sufficient for professional level of language learning and use.

4. Foreign languages other than English: French

Now it is time to turn the focus to French language education in Japan. Traditionally speaking, major other foreign languages in university had been German or French. These languages are selected in the National Center University Entrance Examination or the entrance tests for some private universities apart from English. MEXT (1956, Chapter 3 & Chapter 4) shows the guidelines for French as the first foreign language or the second foreign language focusing on reading, writing, and listening and speaking by targeting (1) Continuing learning French from junior high school and (2) Start to learn for the first time from high school. Some reasons why we specifically take French or German might be, as Tajima (2002, p. 18) summarized, that after the Second World War, many researchers gathered, and the French literacy society started. As well, newly launched universities started to apply French courses and it became popular. Also, the Radio French program that is still successful for the language learners in Japan re-launched its program in 1952.

According to the questionnaire (La Société Japonaise de Langue et Littérature Françaises & La Société Japonaise de Didactique du Français, 2012), French learners as a second foreign language at a university feel the difficulty of learning grammar (53.8%) and pronunciation (20.2%), and they feel that studying French is

a burden (43.3%). Meanwhile, teachers respond about the textbooks made in Japan and they consider them easy and childish (15.4%), stating that contents are too easy (23.4%) (pp. 37-38).

University students focus more on the difficulty in learning grammar and pronunciation for the majority of the class contents. Nevertheless, about 60% of those surveyed wished to continue learning French (p. 5). Similar to the university students, questionnaires from senior high school students demonstrated the difficulties with pronunciation and listening in addition to grammar (p. 77). However, 82.3% of senior high school students felt French lessons were fun or relatively fun (p. 75). According to further analysis, senior high school students feel pleasure and are motivated to learn French. Therefore, they concluded that if they start learning French in senior high school, French language learning broadens their vision and it will be useful in the future (pp. 5-6).

Although MEXT policy treats English as a priority, in order to achieve a sufficient level in foreign languages other than English with the students' motivation, we need to find other means that is not covered in MEXT policy, such as starting foreign language learning in senior high school and continuing throughout their life. In the next section, we discuss the link between foreign language education and their profession or business opportunity.

5. French from a business perspective

When we talk about French from a business perspective, as Takeda (2014) points out, considering that the reliance on companies' revenues from the activities in emerging countries will further increase, companies and governments will pay attention to the trend of economic value of each language and it seems that there is a need to consider the educational measures and learning methods of "mid-to-long term growth strategy" (p. 534). Kamimura (2016, p. 38) explains that companies are closer to consumers due to the globalization of the economic activity and that in that context, multilingual literacy is a requirement.

From a professional perspective, Miura (1994) discussed the aim of bridging the world of interpreting and foreign language education: In Europe, interpreters have been regarded as independent intellectual occupations. An interpreter-translator

training course has been established as a postgraduate course in university. As a consequence, the research on interpreting theory and teaching methods is established as a field, whereas in Japan, expensive classes or lessons were organized by private schools. The current market demand in Japan shows increasing inbound business due to the effect of the Olympic and Paralympic Games in Tokyo in 2020 and the Osaka Kansai Japan EXPO in 2025.

According to the White Paper on Tourism (MLIT, 2018), increasing numbers of visitors and their increased consumption in Japan are becoming important in terms of prosperity of the Japanese economy. The visitors not only spend on their accommodations, but they also purchase products and eat out, etc. Currently, 36% of National Government Licensed Guide Interpreters are 60 years old and over (MLIT, 2014). This result might encourage seniors to keep learning and using languages professionally. In accordance with our inbound business prosperity and investment opportunity, second foreign language education for lifelong learning starting from earlier childhood is important.

In the next section, we will discuss the second language learning possibility using the volunteer guide course contents for seniors as a lifelong learning opportunity by maximizing their experiences, knowledge, and motivation throughout their lives, after schooling or retirement.

6. Spanish volunteer guide course

6.1 Course overview

My research project focuses on second language learning for seniors who are 60 years old and over (we accepted one 57 and one 59 years old for Spanish 2018 Spring course). The research target seniors using tour guiding contents in order for them to maximize their life experiences, knowledge, and motivation is based first on a pilot Spanish course that started in the spring of 2018 (Shibuya, 2018). The same French course starts from the spring of 2019. 15 students originally registered for the senior Spanish volunteer guide course² in 2018. Each lesson comprises 90 minutes once a week. The course was held at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. Four native teachers are all in charge of other standard Spanish senior classes in beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels of the course as well at Kobe City University of Foreign Studies. Therefore, some students follow the standard

² Later we got more applicants and we had 18 students registered for this course.

Spanish class before this volunteer guide course on the same day. Some of them belong to the advanced level class, but other participants in the volunteer guide course come from the intermediate class.

At the beginning of the course, we had a one-day exchange event with a group of seniors from Spain who are volunteer guides and who came to Japan as visitors (Shibuya, 2018). A Spanish learner wrote in the diary “It was not easy to talk, but my motivation increased by meeting and talking with Spanish visitors [of the same age]”. It is necessary to have some practical motivation, especially experiencing human-to-human contact.

From the preliminary questionnaires of Spanish learners, all the students have graduated from university or junior college and have more than at least 3 years’ studying experiences in Spanish. About 29% of them have been learning Spanish more than 10 years. Regarding other language learning experience apart from Spanish, English is the first foreign language studied at school for a longer time than other languages.

6.2 Questionnaire from the Spanish volunteer guide course participants

In order for us to investigate and maximize their life experience into their language learning, we included below open-ended preliminary questionnaires. Following are selective comments from the students translated from Japanese into English.

How has studying Spanish been useful for your life?

- Spanish people’s way of thinking is similar to that of other Western countries, so my experiences working globally with foreigners helped me learning Spanish.
- Can understand others or estimate things better with my imagination compared to my youth. Can guess Spanish meaning from other languages like English or Italian.
- Although there are cultural differences, many languages share similar words. It seems easy to have an image now than when I was young.
- My continued interest in Western history drives me to have a motivation to keep learning Spanish.

- I found it is important to get along with others. Not only learning Spanish, it is important to know other worlds than Japan.
- Not necessary to think too much in detail but grasp the global meaning.
- Have the English teacher license, and my English knowledge helps me to translate in the same way into Spanish.
- Can use various topics when making sentences in Spanish.
- It has not directly to do with learning Spanish, but we can develop our conversations with all people of all generations.
- As traveled in several countries, lots of information received from these experiences is helpful.

From their comments, their communication with people from different cultures and generations, and practical experiences in languages learning through their life and profession extended their mind and interest in their current life. That makes their life rich and let them challenge new issues beyond their age. It seems that they make use of the skills they acquired in their youth and apply this knowledge into the next sophisticated opportunity.

What's the reason for following the volunteer guide course?

- Want to do some volunteering activities using Spanish and want to challenge myself to take the National Government Licensed Guide Interpreter exam in the future.
- I am often asked to guide visitors from Spanish speaking countries and wanted to learn how to support them as a guide.
- Want to try a different way of learning Spanish. Expecting that volunteer guiding training will help to have more chance to talk with people and improve conversation skills.
- Want to know what the interest of the Spanish people who visit Japan is and want to learn how we as a Japanese should welcome foreign visitors.

From their comments, they seem to expect to use their language skills in professional or practical occasions. At the same time, we often see their hospitality (*Omotenashi*) spirit apart from their eagerness to learn the language, whether it is to do with their professional activity or private life. They often seem to feel

responsible for guiding and representing Japan in front of foreigners. Therefore, they prefer to prepare well for the contents in the target language in advance.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, the guidelines for foreign languages other than English by MEXT were reviewed. Although current MEXT guidelines for foreign languages other than English basically should follow the Objectives and Contents for each subject in accordance with English, some professional jobs related to L2 usage (e.g., travel guides or interpreters, etc.) require enough learning experiences of the target languages. With the research project for seniors' second language learning, we reviewed their preliminary questionnaires. From their comments, it seems that learning other foreign languages targeting using them for lifelong, we give students such chance since at their younger age, students seem to enjoy learning new languages without feeling exam pressures and so forth. Also, from the aspect of current market demand, if we think professional usage for the second foreign language, we need to encourage students from school age, as many senior people understood after many years of experience of learning target languages and making use of that language, such as cultural understanding, ways of communication, and so forth with a global mind rather than through strict application of MEXT guidelines.

Through these reviews, we have to strive to achieve a sufficient level of language education in foreign languages other than English using other means starting in high school and continuing throughout life, such as using the volunteer guide course contents that might link to their professional use of foreign languages, etc. This approach inspires the current project of our French volunteer guide course which has just started in the spring of 2019, including lifelong learning aspect by collecting and analyzing data of students of past experiences and current motivation as well as their reflection through the course.

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Abstract

This paper reviews how foreign language education, especially in French, has evolved in Japan by referring to the implementation of the Course of Study Guidelines by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan (MEXT). The guidelines for senior high schools indicate that instruction for foreign languages other than English should follow the Objectives and Contents for each subject in accordance with English (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology – Japan [MEXT], 2018a, p. 239). However, some professional jobs related to L2 usage (e.g., travel guides or interpreters, etc.) require enough learning experiences of the target languages in terms of cultural understanding,

ways of communication, and so forth. This paper explores the possibility of learning other foreign languages (e.g., French) from the aspect of current market demand rather than through strict application of MEXT policies.

Keywords: Foreign Language Learning, Language Policy, Third Age Learner, Lifelong Learning, Volunteer Tour Guide, Language for Specific Purposes.

