

"Mechanisms to implement and maintain policy agendas for teaching English as a foreign language in Japan"

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As culture involves both individuals and society, so language is both personal and social. The relationship between language and culture is a central issue in language teaching since language use cannot be separated from cultural activities. However, this relationship is not always clear. Because of the nature of English as an international language, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) is subject to diverse agendas of the societies in which it is taught and individuals who learn it since the relationships between language and culture are multiple and subject to influence at both the social and individual levels.

In the Japanese society, where the emphasis is on the shared culture as an essential element of social identity, the ambiguity of the ideas of individuals/individuality and the responsibilities of the society for the impact of the mainstream culture on individuals set a very specific framework within which the concept of internationalisation is examined. However, tensions between individuality and social identity, between culture, national identity, and the role of language as purveyors of social and individual identity are not unique to Japan. To clarify how these tensions are addressed and how this leads to specific ways of locating TEFL, it is necessary to examine processes of social reflection and construction as they particularly appear in education through the development and discussion of policy.

This paper examines the mechanisms of implementation and maintenance of policy agendas for Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), and explores how TEFL is being used in the reproduction of specific social values. First, I explain what the national agendas are in educational government policies. Second, I examine the contents of the Courses of Study, which are produced by the government in order to set curriculum standards for secondary school education, in order to explore the reflections of such agendas in terms of what is proposed for implementation. Third, I look at how school textbooks, which play a crucial role in Japanese school education, have been controlled under the Ministerial textbook authorisation system. Last, the English tests in university entrance examinations are examined to identify characteristic aspects of Japanese TEFL in relation to the national agendas.

I Internationalisation and the promotion of Japanese culture and tradition

In Japan, TEFL is closely linked with other national agendas, such as the promotion of Japanese culture and tradition inside and outside Japan within the framework of internationalisation. In Japanese government policy documents¹, TEFL is located at the core of the promotion of "internationalisation". Practical communication skills in foreign languages are emphasised in creating Japanese citizens who are trusted in the international community. However, the promotion of internationalisation is in reality only a different form of promotion of Japan to the world. In other words, the Japanese traditions and culture are regarded as having enduring validity and therefore their values should not be questioned, but should be accepted and appreciated. A crucial point is that not only does the promotion

of internationalisation include the promotion of Japan but it also aims to re-educate Japanese citizens to reassert their identity as Japanese:

Priority will be given to fostering respect for Japanese culture and traditions. In addition, efforts will be made to increase understanding of the cultures and histories of other countries in order to foster qualities that will enable Japanese to live successfully in the international community.

(Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture 1994, 1995: 18)

In other words, internationalisation can best be achieved by promoting Japan both outside and inside Japan. In this sense, the "Japanisation" of Japan is part of the internationalisation of Japan and the world.

Individuals are also brought into the same process as the society. In policy documents, "individuals" are intimately connected with Japanese culture and tradition, and, therefore, no individuals seem to be recognised separately from their identities as Japanese. This waters down the promotion of individuality which is one of the new objectives of school education, and consequently the implications of TEFL are not addressed in terms of their consequences or opportunities for individual learners. Therefore, the promotion of internationalisation as a core political agenda and the promotion of individuality as a core educational agenda seem to function in similar ways to achieve something else, which is the promotion of Japaneseness through education.

II The courses of study for English in secondary schools

The Courses of Study function to implement the agendas which the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture (MESC) promotes in the policy documents by controlling the curricula of secondary schools. The MESC describes the Course of Study as follows:

Monbusho [the MESC] lays down national standards for the curricula for all school levels, from kindergarten to upper secondary, so as to secure an optimum national level of education based on the principle of equal educational opportunity for all... Broad guidelines for the objectives and standard content of each school subject are specified in the "Course of Study" for each of four school levels: kindergarten, elementary, lower and upper secondary. The Course of Study is prepared by Monbusho on the recommendation of the Curriculum Council, an advisory body to the Minister of Education, Science and Culture and promulgated by the Minister. In accordance with the provisions of the School Education Law, Enforcement Regulations for this law, and the Course of Study, individual schools organize their own curricula, taking into account the actual circumstances in each school and each community, and the stage of mental and physical development of children enrolled, as well as their characteristics.

(Handbook for Team-Teaching, 1994: 4)

This statement seems to convey a message that each school is permitted to produce its own curriculum as long as it follows regulations provided by the government and the broad guidelines in the Courses of Study. However, at the same time, the MESC reinforces the requirement to follow closely the Courses of Study by providing the teaching guides or the Course of Study Handbooks for each subject to accompany the Course of Study.

In the Course of Study for lower secondary schools, Foreign Languages are described as "English, German, French and other foreign languages", and schools decide which foreign languages they offer for students. On the surface, Foreign Languages is defined as an

"elective", which gives the impression that students can choose whether or not to study a foreign language and that they can choose the language which they want to study. However, in reality, Foreign Languages is a "compulsory" elective because this is the only elective which many schools offer. Once one foreign language is chosen, it becomes a highly weighted subject in the curriculum like National Language and Mathematics. In other words, "Foreign Languages" is an important and substantially supported part of the curriculum.

The "Overall objectives" of Foreign Languages are:

To develop students' basic abilities to understand a foreign language and express themselves in it, to foster a positive attitude toward communicating in it, and to deepen interest in language and culture, cultivating basic international understanding. (Handbook for Team-Teaching, 1994: 98)

It seems that the task of Foreign Languages teachers is not solely to enable students to use a foreign language. The rhetoric that gives the same priorities to cultivating something else in addition to understanding the subject is common in the objectives of Humanities' subjects. As such, the key issue is what is included in the additional objectives. Among nine subjects, only Foreign Languages has "international understanding" as something to cultivate in its "overall objectives". This suggests the link between promotion of internationalisation and teaching foreign languages in the school curriculum, but at the same time suggests the narrow focus of the promotion of internationalisation in the curriculum.

The "Objectives" for each year help to clarify what is central to language teaching/learning. They reveal little change from year to year and no specifically different content across the years' programs:

[First Year]

- (1) To enable students to understand plain spoken English on simple and familiar topics, to familiarize them with listening to English and to arouse interest in listening
- (2) To enable students to speak about simple and familiar topics in plain English, to familiarize them with speaking English, and to arouse interest in speaking
- (3) To enable students to understand plain written English on simple and familiar topics, to familiarize them with reading English, and to arouse interest in reading
- (4) To enable students to write about simple and familiar topics in plain English, to familiarize them with writing English, and to arouse interest in writing

[Second Year]

- (1) To enable students to understand the speaker's intended message in simple spoken English sentences or passages, to accustom them to listening to English, and to cultivate a willingness to listen to English
- (2) To enable students to express their ideas etc. in simple spoken English sentences or passages, to accustom them to speaking English, and to cultivate a willingness to speak English

(3) To enable students to understand the writer's intended passage in simple written English sentences or passages, to accustom them to reading English, and to cultivate a willingness to read English

(4) To enable students to express their ideas etc. in simple written English sentences or passages, to accustom them to writing English, and to cultivate a willingness to write English

[Third Year]

(1) To enable students to understand the speaker's intended message in simple spoken English passage, to develop proficiency in listening to English, and to foster a positive attitude toward listening

(2) To enable students to express their ideas etc. in simple spoken English passages, to develop proficiency in speaking English, and to foster a positive attitude toward speaking

(3) To enable students to understand the writer's intended message in simple written English passages, to develop proficiency in reading English, and to foster a positive attitude toward English

(4) To enable students to express their ideas etc. in simple written English passage, to develop proficiency in writing English, and to foster a positive attitude toward writing

(Handbook for Team-Teaching, 1994: 98-100)

The objectives are described in a traditional way according to four areas; listening, speaking, reading and writing. The same characterisation of the English to be learned appears all four areas. There is no obvious difference between the "plain spoken/written English" (First Year) and the "simple spoken/written English" (Second and Third Years). Actually, in the original Japanese text the same word *shohotekina*, literally "elementary", is used. Similarly, it is not clear how the difference between "to understand plain spoken English on simple and familiar topics" (First Year) and "to understand the speaker's intended message in simple spoken English sentences or passages" (Second Year) defines the different levels of proficiency. In addition, they are described with abstract and undefined words, which is similar to the way internationalisation is promoted in the government policies. First year students are expected to "familiarise" themselves with English and to have their interest in English "aroused", second year students are expected to "accustom" themselves to English and to "cultivate willingness" to participate in the four activities (speaking, listening, reading and writing), and third year students are expected to "foster a positive attitude toward" those activities. A crucial point is that those developments in learning attitude are not integrated with the development of language proficiency in the curriculum.

Another overall objective, "to deepen interest in language and culture, cultivating basic international understanding", is not reflected in any of these objectives in any year or in the content for any year. However, suddenly it is introduced in the statement regarding teaching materials in the "syllabus design and treatment of the contents":

Teaching materials should help:

A To deepen international understanding from a broad perspective, to raise students' awareness as Japanese citizens living in the global community, and to cultivate a spirit of international cooperation

B To heighten interest in language and culture, to foster a respectful attitude toward them, and to cultivate well- roundedness

C To deepen understanding of the ways of life and cultures of Japan and the rest of the world, to broaden international perspective, and cultivate fair judgement

(Handbook for Team-Teaching, 1994: 107)

"Japanese citizens" and "cultures of Japan" appear without any reference to the objectives of the subject, and without elaboration the world is described as "Japan and the rest of the world". It is not specified how the teaching materials (which are not described) are to be used in order to achieve the objectives for each year. This indicates an assumption that "culture" (as a universal concept) can be taught within language teaching without reference to any particular methodology. This contradicts the way foreign languages are listed; English, German and French, since those three languages do not represent the rest of the world, and therefore cannot necessarily identify the universality of the cultural values which they incorporate. In sum, promotion of internationalisation through language and culture is not reflected in the actual curriculum of Foreign Languages. The overall objectives, the objectives for each year, and the teaching materials do not combine with each other as a means of cultivating students' "international understanding". This is also reflected in the Course of Study for upper secondary schools.

III The textbook authorisation system/process

The MESCC defines textbooks as the principal teaching materials:

1. Publishing and Distributing Textbooks

Textbooks are the principal teaching materials used in schools and thus play an important role in children's learning activities. Textbooks undergo the following processes before being supplied to schoolchildren.

First, textbooks are written and edited by private textbook publishers and are then submitted for authorisation by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture. Through this process they are authorized for use as school textbooks. Authorised textbooks are then examined by boards of education, which are the establishing authorities for schools (or by principals in the case of national and private schools). The boards adopt the textbooks that are most suitable for their particular regions and schools. The textbooks adopted are supplied to schools by distributors throughout Japan for use in the new school year. In fiscal 1994, 177.96 million copies of 1,479 titles were published and distributed.

(Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture 1994, 1995: 99-100)

The MESCC emphasises the important role of school textbooks in learning activities to justify the need for textbook authorisation by the Minister. There is no role given to individual teachers or individual schools in the process of publishing and distributing textbooks. This indicates that textbooks themselves have authority in school education and that the process of education should be from the MESCC to students, with individual teachers being no more than a means of transmitting the objectives and content which the MESCC sets. The MESCC explains the aims of the textbook authorisation as follows:

2. Improving the Textbook Authorization System

(1) The Aims of Textbook Authorization

The School Education Law stipulates that textbooks used in elementary schools, lower secondary schools, upper secondary schools, and special education schools must be either authorized by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture or published under the Ministry's copyright. The aims of this requirement are to ensure true equality of opportunity in education and to maintain and improve educational standards throughout Japan.

The textbook authorization system is designed to encourage creativity and originality in authors by leaving the task of writing and editing textbooks to private publishers. Authorization by the Minister of Education, Science and Culture is also intended to ensure the provision of textbooks that are objective and fair and are based on appropriate educational considerations. Textbook authorization is conducted fairly and stringently by the Textbook Authorization and Research Council in accordance with the Ministry's guidelines for textbook authorization. Some critics maintain that textbook authorization is unconstitutional, but the Supreme Court has ruled that the system is constitutional.

(Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture 1994, 1995: 100)

According to the MESC, there are two aims of the textbook authorisation. The first aim, "to ensure true equality of opportunity in education", seems to be achieved by "leaving the task of writing and editing textbooks to private publishers". This indicates that producing textbooks was not originally the responsibility of the private sector, but the MESC compromised by leaving the task to them in an effort to ensure that creativity and originality are guaranteed. At a different level, the MESC's expectation of publishers' creativity and originality in producing textbooks contradicts the absolute silence on the individual teachers' role in the selection of textbooks. The Courses of Study are not addressed to individual teachers but rather to schools. Therefore it is very difficult to think that the textbook authorisation system is designed to encourage creativity and originality in individual textbook authors. Since many textbook authors are teachers, the extent to which the MESC wishes to encourage originality and creativity in teachers is very unclear. By giving individual teachers no clear encouragement to assert their professional judgements and creativity, the MESC's actions reassert the dominance of the centrally approved textbooks and Courses of Study.

In the extract cited above, the MESC's lack of explicitness in terms of the standards of the textbook authorisation process relates to the statement regarding the unconstitutional nature of the textbook authorisation system. The MESC does not clarify who maintains the view that textbook authorisation is unconstitutional or on what grounds this view is held. The MESC explains that the Supreme Court has ruled that the textbook authorisation "system" is constitutional, but this does not necessarily mean that all the aspects of the decisions made within this process have been ruled as constitutional. For example, in 1993 the Supreme Court ruled that the textbook authorisation system was constitutional but also ruled that the MESC's opinions regarding the amendment of the contents of specific textbooks were not legitimate in three cases. The MESC did not appeal against the decision. This suggests that the MESC is avoiding clarifying problems surrounding the textbook authorisation system. One consequence of this lack of acknowledgment of problems is that the textbooks which are approved (and the values reflected in them) are protected and as a result their dominance over the decisions and actions of individual teachers is increased.

The MESC explains the implementation of textbook authorisation as follows:

(2) Implementation of Textbook Authorization and Publication of Results

Authorisation procedures and criteria under the present textbook authorization system have been substantially simplified and prioritized, in line with recommendations contained in the report of the National Council on Educational Reform, in order to create a system that is simple and easy to understand. By emphasizing the role and responsibilities of the Textbook Authorization and Research Council, the Ministry of Education, Science and Culture has created a fairer and more appropriate authorization system. The present system has been phased in since fiscal 1990 for use with textbooks edited in accordance with the new Courses of Study. In fiscal 1993 upper secondary school textbooks (mainly for second-year students) were authorized under this system (Figure II. 3. 2).

Since fiscal 1991 the results of [the] examination of manuscripts submitted for textbook authorization have been made available for public inspection. This policy was introduced in response to public interest in textbooks and is designed to increase understanding of the textbook authorization process. In fiscal 1994 the results were made more widely accessible, being displayed for public inspection in six locations. In addition, a publicity pamphlet outlining the authorization system was published and distributed.

(Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture 1994, 1995: 100)

According to the flow chart in the document, there are six steps in the examination of proposed textbooks:

1. Application
2. Examination by Textbook Authorisation and Research Council
3. Notification of Council's opinions
4. Submission of list of revisions
5. Re-examination by Textbook Authorization and Research Council
6. Decision to authorise/reject textbooks

In the first step of textbook authorisation, the MESC receives the applications for authorisation from the publishers. Then, the MESC consults with the Textbook Authorization and Research Council, which consists of university academics and elementary and secondary school teachers appointed by the Minister. The actual work of evaluation and negotiation is done by the MESC bureaucrats rather than the teachers of the Council. The Council judges whether the textbook is suitable or not based on its deliberations and recommends the results to the Minister. This is described as "notification of the Council's opinions" (Step 3). The final decision as to whether or not to authorise the publication of a particular textbook is made by the Minister on the basis of the Council's recommendation.

This procedure suggests that the whole process of deciding the suitability or appropriateness of textbooks is in large part controlled by the MESC. The members of the Textbook Authorization and Research Council are appointed by the Minister, and proposed textbooks are examined by the Council members and the MESC's own staff according to the MESC's guidelines, and the final decision is made by the Minister. In other words, the MESC controls the process by setting up the Council and providing its staff and the guidelines for the examination of the textbooks. Therefore, the MESC's claim that the improvement of the system after 1990 has created "a fairer and more appropriate authorization system" by "emphasizing the role and responsibilities of the Textbook Authorization and Research Council" (Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture 1994, 1995:

100) remains superficial because the fundamental structure of the procedure was not changed.

Step 4, "Submission of list of revisions" indicates that the publishers are given opportunities to revise their textbooks in response to Council's opinions. The process of communicating with the publishers about the nature of the changes required is carried out by the MESC bureaucrats. Other members of the Council play no role. This indicates that the textbook authorisation system not only authorises textbooks to be published, but functions to make publishers amend their textbooks according to the view of the Council in the process of authorisation. This process narrows the range of creativity and originality in textbook authors which the MESC claims to encourage by leaving the task of writing and editing textbooks to private publishers.

IV University entrance examination

"Entrance examination hell" is a common expression which reflects the severe competition in the selection process for enrolment in universities in Japan. The MESC identifies the excessive competition in entrance examinations as a social product which reflects important values of Japanese society.² The MESC accepts the view of life in which people obtain social status by receiving a good education as a "national character". The negative influence of excessive competition in entrance examinations is mainly argued from the aspect of character building of students, not from the perspective of academic reliability. The MESC does not address whether the current entrance examination system functions adequately for the assessment of academic achievement.

The MESC has established the framework for creating and maintaining competition in the university entrance examination system. In Japan, there are universities (four years) and junior colleges (two years) in higher education, and the majority are private.³ In general, national and local public universities have higher status than most private universities. The MESC explains university entrance examinations in the framework of the university entrance selection system, and particularly addresses the National Centre for University Entrance Examinations (NCUEE) in the MESC which has prepared university entrance examinations since 1990. These examinations are compulsory for all applicants for all national and local public universities. The NCUEE examinations are optional for private universities. The number of subjects which are required to be examined varies from faculty to faculty within universities. The MESC promotes the NCUEE examinations as follows:

1. Promotion of the Use of NCUEE [National Centre for University Entrance Examinations] Examinations

University entrance examinations prepared by the NCUEE were first administered in fiscal 1990. The purpose of NCUEE examinations is to eliminate excessively difficult and idiosyncratic questions and provide consistently high-quality questions that can be used to evaluate students' achievement of the basic learning provided in upper secondary schools. These examinations are also designed to be used in appropriate combination with the second-stage examinations conducted by individual universities, thereby providing a way to individualize and diversify the entrance examination system.

The use of NCUEE examinations does not aggravate the problem of university ranking,⁴ since each university can choose the number of subjects for which it will use NCUEE examinations. In addition, the examinations can be used by private universities as well as national universities and local public universities.

Growing numbers of private universities are participating in the NCUEE examination system. The system is operating effectively and is generally well regarded by those involved at the university and upper secondary school levels. Efforts are now focusing on measures to ensure the smooth implementation of the system and promote its use.

(Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture 1994, 1995: 117)

The purpose of the examination conducted by the MESG is to eliminate "excessively" difficult and idiosyncratic questions and maintain academic standards.

The examination attempted to "assess students' general basic abilities to understand and use English at upper secondary school student level, based on the Course of Study". The NCUEE examination is not a general proficiency test. The standard is the assumed "upper secondary school student level", and it is assessed "in general", not according to specific tasks. Consequently, the results of the examination do not profile how well students, who achieve the full score in this examination, are able to use English for communicative purposes. Because of the purpose of the NCUEE examinations, which is to select students for national and local public universities, the examination questions are designed to discriminate between students for selection purposes rather than to generate a good representation of proficiency. Therefore, for example, the knowledge of one particular word could be designed to affect the students' scores even though it is not relevant to their general proficiency in English. This suggests that one of the purposes of NCUEE examinations which is "to eliminate excessively difficult and idiosyncratic questions" is referring to such "difficulties" in terms of their degree of discrimination, rather than difficulties in terms of the level of proficiency. One consequence of this is that examiners can select items for their ability to discriminate between candidates without having to make consistent reference to a theory of language or language use.

According to the examination question preparing group in the NCUEE specialist committee, the guidelines for preparing examination questions are framed according to the types of questions. Pronunciation questions were considered as identifying words in context, which is "a situation of live language use". This concept is described in a different way; the questions relating to word stress are intended to produce "an image of live words". The concept seems to suggest that the group responsible for preparing questions thinks words/expressions are "alive" when their meanings can be established only within the particular contexts, which, they think, happens in conversation. It is not clear whether they think language is "dead" in other cases, but their view implies that English is learned or taught in parts such as vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, composition, paragraph comprehension etc, not according to learners' language activities for particular tasks. This view of a language existing or living independent of its speakers is not a view consistent with an attempt to incorporate individuality into the Course of Study for English and would require a major change in the examination structure of it were to be implemented.

The examination preparation group introduced conversation-type questions within the written test, acknowledging the change in English teaching at upper secondary schools in terms of the emphasis on communication. It reports that the attempt was received favourably and that questions in the context of conversation under "natural situation settings" were valued. This foreshadows the greater focus on communication in the new Course of Study, but by virtue of this foreshadowing makes unclear to what extent the 1997 matching of the examination with the new Course of Study will result in any change from the existing model in the examination. In terms of the new Course of Study, the group suggests that the change could be reflected in the introduction of listening tests. This suggests that the emphasis on "communication" is interpreted in a narrow sense of listening and speaking activities without involving active communication between individuals in various language activities. In

addition to this, other elements which the new Course of Study focuses on, such as "to heighten interest in language and culture" and "to deepen international understanding", are not given any attention at all in the discussion. The following are items the group wishes to tackle, in preparing for questions which conform with the new Course of Study within two years:

(1) Amount: proper numbers of questions and word numbers in short and long essays should be discussed.

(2) Language elements: Language elements should be based on the Course of Study, and should not exceed the ranges of English I and II. Language elements which are appropriate to assess students' abilities in language use should be increased.

(3) Topics: Fairness should be considered. Contents should be appropriate for the interests of upper secondary school students, and questions should not be ambiguous. Clear and accurate answer choice should be provided.

(4) Balance among questions: Pronunciation, grammar, re sequencing texts, conversation, understanding of graphics and tables, reading comprehension etc. have to be well balanced. A narrow academic assessment should be avoided

(5) Format: Within the limit of computer readable format, a reliable and appropriate format should be maintained.

(6) Points: In order to evaluate students' ability fairly, and to evaluate students' general abilities of English, the appropriateness of points for each question should be considered.5

This list contains no reference to heightening interest in language and culture, and no reference to deepening international understanding, let alone to issues of individuality. It can only be assumed that such matters will not be addressed in the new examination format.

Conclusion

Across curricula, teaching materials (textbooks) and assessment (examinations) of English in Japan, communicative proficiency is not the priority. In addition to that, no particular teaching methodology for either culture or international understanding is provided. This is enforced by the textbook authorisation system which functions to ensure a strong compliance with the Courses of Study, and university entrance examinations which serve to discriminate between students, rather than to assess overall English proficiency. Further, the notion of the individuality does not occupy a consistent place in any of the structures. When it does appear, it is already located within a construction of identity as Japanese and linked to the learner's Japanese culture.

The emphasis on the practical communication skills is not integrated into the teaching of international understanding since "international understanding" is defined in such a way that it has as an essential element the attitudinal dimension of the creation of Japanese citizens who are trusted in the international community. International understanding remains as an issue of "attitude" in both the policy documents and the Courses of Study, and is not assessed in examinations of students' command of English. In the policy documents "individuals" means "individual Japanese citizens", the identity of whom is closely constrained by Japanese culture and tradition. Since Japanese culture and tradition are not defined but accepted as they are, individual Japanese are not expected to develop their own abilities to criticise the assumed values. Not only individual learners, but also individual teachers and individual textbook authors are treated in the same way in policy documents.

Consequently, it is impossible for the concept of "individual" which underpins the policy documents and the Courses of Study to appear in the examinations or textbooks.

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(ed.) (1995) Daigaku nyuushi sentaa shiken mondai shuu. Tokyo: Ookurashou insatsu kyoku, p. 366. Translations are mine. 14