

Investigating Teacher and Student Attitudes towards MEXT-approved English Textbooks in Japan: A Preliminary Study

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Enhancing communication abilities has been the goal for English learning in the Course of Study for Foreign Languages as determined by the Ministry of Education, Culture, and Technology (MEXT). However, this official goal does not match the classroom experiences of teachers and students. From the teachers' point of view, students expect to learn the skills needed to perform well on entrance examinations. In addition, MEXT's introduction of the evaluation system in 2005 has negative influence on students' communication abilities in English lessons. Teachers are caught in a vicious cycle of being forced to meet the flood of requirements imposed by MEXT, students, and the evaluation system.

This paper examines the perceptions of the three stakeholders (MEXT, students, and teachers) toward English education in Japan. Students' attitudes are gathered through questionnaires and teachers' perceptions are collected in interviews. Findings reveal that the entrance examinations, a negative backwash effect, and the evaluation system constitute barriers to English education in Japan. Results are discussed in light of previous studies, including Prodromou (1995) and Kyoiku Souken (2005).

In conclusion, the current situation of the teachers is clarified. In addition, suggestions for further studies and improvements are provided.

Key Words : approved textbooks, English education, entrance examination, evaluation system, MEXT, negative backwash effect, student perceptions, teacher perceptions

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I. Introduction

This paper examines teachers' and students' perceptions of English education in light of textbooks approved by MEXT. MEXT (2012) places emphasis on developing students' communication abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, and ideas. Therefore, textbooks approved by MEXT are designed with this emphasis in mind (Taniguchi 1998: 155-157). In addition, McGrath (2002: 11, 2006: 171) points out that textbooks are a central element in teaching-learning encounters. Teachers can develop communication abilities by using the approved textbooks. However, the teachers' perceptions of these textbooks are not in accordance with the official stance taken by MEXT. The reason for this discrepancy is that English education in high school is related to their goals for higher education. Therefore, this paper examines the following issues: 1) what are students' perceptions of English lessons, 2) how do teachers feel about the approved textbooks and English education, and 3) what is the state of current English education in Japan.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we discuss results of a questionnaire and examine students' perceptions of English lessons and their needs for English. In section 3, we present results from interviews to illustrate the teachers' perceptions of English education and the textbooks approved by MEXT. In section 4, we consider results from both the questionnaire and interviews in light of findings from Hiramatsu (2005) and Gorsuch (2001). Additionally, we will consider the Japanese context with reference to Prodromou (1995). In section 5, we present summary of our claims. In addition, we will further propose some

improvements for the future studies.

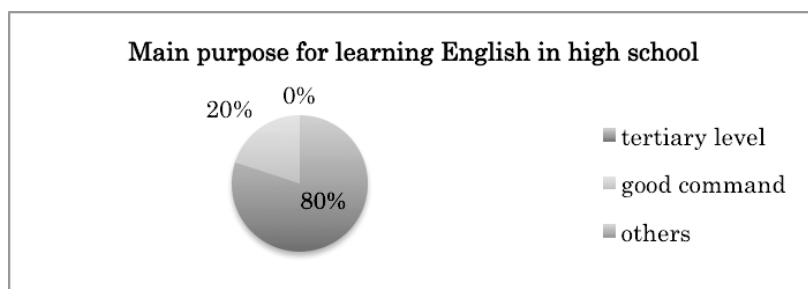
II. Students' Perceptions of English Education

Students' views of the approved textbooks as well as their needs related to English lessons are the most important features in an examination of teachers' perceptions. An analysis of their needs determines what to teach and how to teach (Nunan 1988: 75).

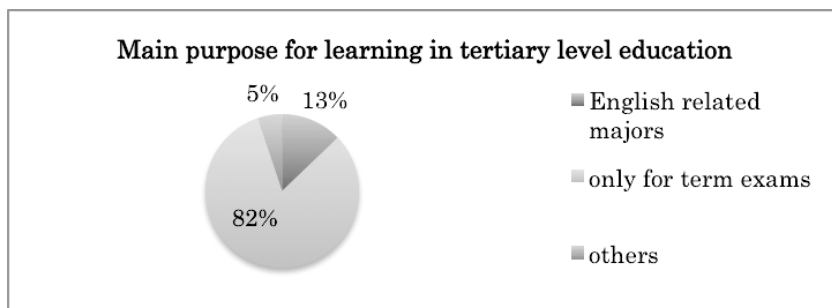
The method used in this study to investigate students' perceptions is a questionnaire (see appendix 1). The items included in this questionnaire are both 'open questions' and 'closed questions.' The participants are students in their third year of high school who are applying for admission to university. Some participants are not confident speaking in public, and since the total number of participants is 50, conducting individual interviews was not possible.

1. Results from the Closed Questions

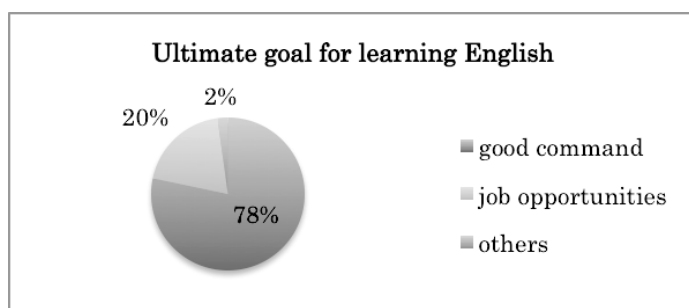
For Question 1, 40 students answered that their main purpose for learning English is to go to tertiary-level education, which represents 80% of all the participants. On the other hand, the remaining students reported that their main purpose is to have a good command of English. These results are presented in the chart below.



For Question 2, this questionnaire also revealed that, while only 13% of the participants will major in English-related academic areas such as English literature, intercultural communication, linguistics, and phonetics, approximately 82% of the participants plan to study English if English is a required course. Other participants are not enthusiastically motivated to learn English at the tertiary level. These results are shown in the chart below.



However, for Question 3, 78% of participants commented that their goal for learning English is to have a good command of English. Approximately 20% of the students reported that their goal is to work in large, well-known companies. However, only 2% of the students reported that their goal for learning English is simply to go to tertiary level education.



2. Analysis of the Open Questions and Students' Answers

This questionnaire makes it clear that most high school students expect teachers to teach linguistic knowledge and grammar that will be included on entrance examinations they will take in the near future. Hence, they tend to consider approved textbooks to be a preparation for entrance examinations. However, some students commented that the possibility of developing communication abilities depends on teachers. Nevertheless, most students see the approved textbooks as impractical and inauthentic. Analysis of the responses to the open and closed questions has revealed that students' main goal for English learning in high school is not to have a good command of English but to get the linguistic knowledge and vocabulary that will be tested on entrance examinations. The competency in English that MEXT requires

appears to be a temporary goal until they can successfully pass entrance examinations.

III. How Teachers Use the Textbooks Approved by MEXT

According to McGrath (2006: 171), textbooks are influential in terms of teachers' attitudes and it is important to understand these attitudes. McGrath (2002: 11) also points out that in many situations the expectation is that teaching will be based on a single textbook. Therefore, in order to research teachers' attitudes, we conducted interviews (see appendix 2). Compared to a questionnaire, interviews allow participants to explore issues in greater depth. Five teachers were interviewed. The participants had different backgrounds and their teaching experiences ranged from five years to over ten years. The following chart shows background information for the teachers.

| teacher | gender | experience | others |
|---------|--------|------------|----------------------------------|
| A | Female | 6 years | head of English department |
| B | Male | 10 years | experienced in vocational school |
| C | Male | 7 years | N/A |
| D | Male | 5 years | N/A |
| E | Female | 5 years | N/A |

1. Do you use the approved textbooks to meet MEXT requirements?

Before posing this question to teachers, we asked if they knew what MEXT requires in English education. The answers from them are summarized as follows.

- **Teacher A**

As a head of the English department, she knows that MEXT requires teachers to enhance students' communication abilities through English lessons. However, she comments that it is almost impossible to fully satisfy this requirement because she is supposed to teach English in order to get her students ready for entrance examinations.

- **Teacher B**

He says that what MEXT requires of us is to improve students' communication abilities in a balanced manner. As a matter of fact, even if he knows the requirement, he teaches English disregarding it.

- **Teacher C**

He argues that communication skills should be taught in English lessons. Since new subjects such as English Expression and Communication English were introduced in the Course of Study by MEXT in 2012, we have to teach English to meet the requirement.

- **Teacher D**

Students' communication abilities should be enhanced.

- **Teacher E**

Communication abilities are the most indispensable feature in English. Since MEXT puts great emphasis on developing communication abilities, it is important for English teachers to develop students' skills in communication.

Not surprisingly, they are all aware of MEXT's requirements. This is partly because the Course of Study for English has been drastically changed, and new subjects such as English Expression and Communication English were introduced in 2012. However, it is surprising that some of them are reluctant to teach English in ways that meet MEXT's requirements.

2. Do you think it possible to enhance communication abilities by using the approved textbooks?

Some teachers believe that the approved textbooks have some defects in teaching communication skills. Others believe the opposite is true. Their responses are summarized as follows.

- **Teacher A**

She asserts that whether students' communication abilities develop depends on how teachers use the approved textbooks. Those textbooks are well designed. The contents included in the textbooks are varied in terms of topics and carefully selected. In every

lesson, there are a lot of speaking and listening activities. As a result, it is possible to enhance students' communication skills if the approved textbooks are used properly.

- **Teacher B**

He has the same idea as Teacher A in terms of the textbooks' designs. In comparison with the past, it is possible to integrate communication abilities in every approved textbook. Nevertheless, there are problems in all the textbooks because they consist of literary and colloquial sentences. In other words, the textbooks do not have the authenticity needed in developing communication abilities.

- **Teacher C**

The approved textbooks are ineffective in teaching communication abilities and preparing students for the entrance examinations. To prepare students for those exams, the approved textbooks include grammar patterns and vocabularies that are essential knowledge on the exams. However, the knowledge that can be acquired in the approved textbooks is limited. In addition, with regard to communication abilities, they lack authenticity.

- **Teacher D**

We can develop our lessons to meet MEXT requirements with the approved textbooks.

- **Teacher E**

In the approved textbooks, there are more communicative activities than before, such as dialogues, presentations, and debates. Therefore, students have opportunities to speak English in classrooms. However, it is the teachers' methods of using those books that enhance students' communication abilities.

All the teachers have the same general attitudes about the approved textbooks. Overall, they feel that the textbooks have been revised to include communicative activities but remain inauthentic. Interestingly, it must be noted that teacher A commented that whether a teacher can enhance students' communication abilities depends on how he or she uses the textbooks.

3. What barriers are there in English education in Japan?

- **Teacher A**

There are two barriers for English education in Japan: the context unique to Japan and MEXT. In the Japanese context, errors are considered fatal in entrance examinations and they must be avoided. In this context, students are often passive and afraid of making mistakes when speaking English. Moreover, English is not spoken in their daily lives; therefore, it is an unfamiliar language. MEXT does not make any effort to develop teachers' abilities in English. Instead, they establish the goals in English, and the process required for reaching the goals depends on the local context.

- **Teacher B**

A barrier for English education in Japan is that learners cannot acquire the four abilities, namely, reading, writing, listening and speaking, in a balanced manner.

- **Teacher C**

The assessment system in Japan is a barrier for English education. Teachers are assessed according to the number of students who successfully enter the universities. Thus, communication abilities are considered extra luxuries that many teachers cannot afford.

- **Teacher D**

The barriers are the entrance examinations and the National Center Test.

- **Teacher E**

The input is mainly focused on the Japanese context, such as filling in gaps and memorizing grammar patterns and vocabulary that are tested on entrance examinations. Students in Japan are disadvantaged because they do not have an opportunity to speak English.

Most of the teachers noted that examinations are one of the main barriers for English education in Japan. As for teacher B, he claims that the Japanese context precludes students from acquiring the four abilities, namely, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, in a balanced manner. In other words, teachers feel trapped into only providing lessons that explicitly prepare students for the tests.

IV. English Education in Japanese High Schools

Results from the questionnaires and interviews conducted in a Japanese high school reveal a gap in the perceptions of students, teachers, and MEXT. Teachers are torn between students' needs and MEXT's requirements. Ultimately, students' needs take precedence. Why has this situation occurred? The questionnaire and interviews provide possible answers to this question.

1. Entrance Examinations

Results from the interviews and questionnaire reveal that not only teachers but also students in Japan are affected by entrance examinations. This result can be explained by the fact that the purpose of students learning English is to go to tertiary-level education (see II.1). As we discussed in II.1, in the questionnaire, the expectation of 80% of the students is that they will learn the skills tested in the entrance examinations. The result also points out that entrance examinations in Japan are influential (see III.3). As discussed in III.3, the main barriers for English education in Japan are entrance examinations. In terms of the examinations, four abilities, namely, reading, writing, listening, and speaking, cannot be taught in a balanced manner. Moreover, exams do not follow the communicative curriculum guidelines established by the Course of Study (Poole 2003). Therefore, it is understandable that many English teachers feel they are expected to prepare students for university entrance exams (Gorsuch 2001: 4).

Moreover, Hino (1988) characterizes *Yakudoku* as a pivotal element in teaching English. This word-for-word reading and translation activity has influenced English instructional practices (Hiramatsu 2005: 116). *Yakudoku*, a traditional teacher-centered instruction method, focuses on translation of English into Japanese, and its main emphasis is on vocabulary or linguistic features tested in examinations (Gorsuch 2001: 4). As a result, this has transformed the approved textbooks, which can enhance communication abilities into test-oriented abilities, and their instruction is tailored to the test. In this context, oral communication classes will likely be of little help to students preparing for the exam because they will not provide students with the linguistic and interpretive skills needed to address academic texts (Shea 2009: 127).

2. Negative Backwash Effect

In the Japanese context, teachers and students have a close relationship with the traditional and intensive individual translation activity, as noted above (IV.1). As a result, they both are trapped in a negative backwash effect (Prodromou 1995).

According to Prodromou (1995: 13), a backwash effect can be defined as the direct or indirect effect of examinations on teaching method. The backwash effect is that in order to prepare for the examination, students must write many past papers. Prodromou (1995: 14-5) also adds that “replicating from past papers or text may be involved, and the exercises types favored in the particular examination students will be taking as well: multiple choice, transformation, or gap filling.” Another characteristic of the backwash effect is the use of inauthentic materials. These materials concentrate on word- and sentence-level linguistic features in addition to skills that are easier to test. Reading and writing skills are emphasized more than speaking and listening skills. This backwash effect has a negative influence on teachers' teaching methodology.

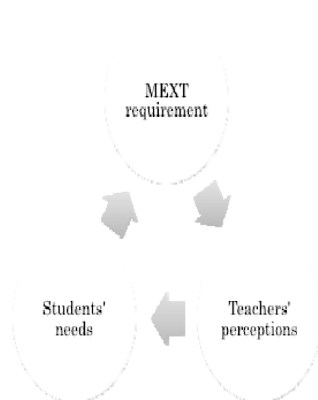
However, the results of the questionnaire indicate that students are trapped in this negative backwash effect as well. Most students study English in order to pass exams for tertiary-level education. Thus, students adopt the attitudes of test-takers, and as a result, teachers teach English in accordance with the students' attitudes.

3. The Evaluation System

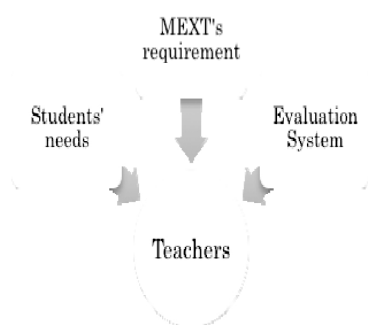
As commented above (see IV.2), the Japanese context involves a negative backwash effect (Prodromou 1995). Moreover, the evaluation system accelerates this situation. This evaluation system started in Tokyo in 2000, and then in Kanagawa in 2003 and in Osaka in 2004. MEXT put this system into effect in 2005 (Kyoiku Souken 2005). However, this system influences teachers' promotions and personnel transfers (Kyoiku Souken 2005). In addition to this, teachers are assessed not only by those in managerial positions, such as principals and vice-principals, but also by their students as well. According to Ohashi (2010), this system can be criticized for its opaqueness and lack of objectivity. Since a principal must evaluate all teachers' performances in a school, his or her subjectivity may influence the assessment. Moreover, this will be impracticable in terms of time. Students' subjectivity must also be taken into consideration because lectures are not always enjoyable for students.

V. Conclusion

MEXT has strongly emphasized communication abilities, and teachers ideally must follow these guidelines and use the approved textbooks. Doing so provides students with the opportunity to enhance their communication abilities. That is, MEXT, teachers, and students are expected to move in the same direction in terms of English education. The figure below illustrates this close trilateral relationship.



However, the situation in Japan is very different from what it should be ideally. In reality, the ideal relationships have been collapsed, and the teachers are forced to meet all the requirements or needs. This situation is represented in the figure below.



In this case, students' needs refer to the skills and techniques tested in the entrance examination. In this context, even if the approved textbooks can enhance students' communication abilities, and even if teachers have a positive view of the approved textbooks, it is almost impossible to enhance students' communication abilities. Teachers are bound by different requirements, and as a result, the communicative goal for English education is

likely to be ignored.

It goes without saying that we need more research to draw more specific and convincing conclusions, since the questionnaire and interviews were carried out in only one high school, and only five participants were interviewed. Therefore, in order to investigate this trilateral relationship in greater depth, future studies should increase the number of teacher and student participants and extend the scope of investigation. Thus, the present paper serves as a preliminary study of our research project.

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Appendix 1

1. What is your main purpose for learning English in high school?

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------|
| a | to go to tertiary level education | b | to have a good command of English | c | others |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------|

a→please go to question No2 b→please go to question No3 c→please go to question No4

2. What do you wish to learn in tertiary level education?

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|--|---|---------------------------------|
| a | mainly English ex: English literature etc. | b | sometimes English ex: only for term exams | c | no English ex: not necessary |
|---|---|---|--|---|---------------------------------|

a. b→please go to question No3 c→please go to question No5

3. What is your goal for learning English?

| | | | | | |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------|
| a | to have a good command of English | b | to work in a big company | c | others |
|---|-----------------------------------|---|--------------------------|---|--------|

a, b→Thank you for your cooperation.

If you have any other goal for learning English, please go to question No5.

c→please go to question No5

4. What is your main purpose for learning English in high school?

| |
|--|
| |
|--|

5. What is your goal for learning English?

6. Can the approved textbooks enhance your communication abilities?

7. Which do you like to take precedence, communication abilities or knowledge tested in exams?

Appendix 2

1. Name: () Sex: ()

2. Teacher's experience () years

3. Do you use the approved textbooks to meet MEXT requirement (develop students communication abilities)? If yes→How?

If no →Why not?

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4. Do you think it possible to enhance communication abilities by using the approved textbooks? If yes→Why?

If no →Why not?

5. What barriers are there in English education in Japan?

