

English Educational Policy for High Schools in Japan:

Ideals vs. Reality

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Abstract ■ The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issues a document known as the Course of Study Guidelines on average once every ten years. This document states the overall and specific goals for English education in Japanese junior and senior high schools including specifying the contents of ministry approved textbooks. This study looks at the influence these guidelines have had on classroom pedagogy from the point of view of the student. For this study 112 college freshmen were surveyed shortly after they had been admitted into several private universities in the Tokyo area, responding to both closed-response and open-response questions about their perceptions of classroom practice in each of the six English courses defined in the guidelines. In the closed-response questionnaire, students were asked to rate various items related to teaching. In the open-response questionnaire, students were asked to describe the teaching practice of their English teachers. Standard descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data. The study gives insights into the successes and failures of the guideline's curriculum revisions. It is a response to call for the further study by Nunan (2003) and helps to show the complicated gap between educational policies and actual teaching practice in Japan.

Keywords ■ curriculum development, educational policies, English as a foreign language, English education in Japan, secondary education, teaching methods.



Introduction

The quality of English language education in Japan has been routinely criticized since the turn of the century. In order to help Japan to be able to quickly absorb information about western technological advances after the opening of Japan in the Meiji Restoration, early English education practice focused primarily on the development of reading and writing skills rather than the development of communicative ability (Kitao and Kitao 1995). Tracing the development of English education over the past century, Butler and Iino point out that since the early 1900s:

English became primarily an academic pursuit, learned mainly for the purpose of reading written texts rather than as a means of communication. Even after the nationalistic movement of this period ended, English was widely adopted as a screening process for elite education. As a result, the so-called *juken eigo* (English for the purpose of entrance examinations) became the main goal of learners rather than English for communication (Butler and Iino 2005: 28).

Since the Olympics were held in Tokyo in 1964, which brought Japan into the international spotlight, there has been an increasing emphasis by the government and private sector of English education on developing the spoken English skills of the Japanese population (Yoshida 2003). In the 1970s and 1980s, many complained that the Ministry of Education's (now the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, or MEXT) Course of Study Guidelines, which outlines the specific goals, contents and structure of junior and senior high school English classes made no mention of the need to teach English for communicative purposes, and argued that such a change was necessary to improve the teaching and learning of English. Possibly in reaction to this, the 1989 Course of Study Guidelines stated for the first time that the primary objective of English education in Japan was to develop students' communicative ability in English (Yoshida 2003). It also made a major revision in English curriculum, implementing, among other things, the creation of required courses in Oral Communication for high school students (Oral A, B and C). At about the same time, the Ministry of Education worked jointly with the Ministry of Home Affairs and Foreign Affairs to create the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program in 1987, which now employs over 5500 native speakers of English as assistant language teachers in secondary schools throughout the country (Council of Local Authorities for International Relations 2006).

In the 1990s, there was yet another debate about the goals of English education. Butler and Iino (2005) in an excellent summary of historical influences on English educational policy in Japan, discuss several politicians who had a significant impact on the debate over which direction Japan's policy should take. In the 1970s, Hiraizumi, who was a member of the House of Representatives, criticized the effectiveness of English Education and argued that part of the problem was the influence of college entrance exams, and that a good solution would be to remove English from the list of subjects for such exams. In the 1990s, Funabashi, an influential newspaper columnist, professor and high level government advisor, argued that English should be made the second official language of Japan, and that rather than drop English as a subject on the entrance exams that more standardized measurements, such as the TOEFL exam, should be used instead.

Dissatisfied with the impact of Course of Study Guidelines on actual classroom practice, MEXT issued a more concrete set of goals to improve English education in Japan known as the 'Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities' in 2003 (MEXT 2003). Among other things, this plan included a call to send at least 10,000 high school students to study English abroad annually, the introduction of English as a subject at the elementary school level, criterion-based assessment of student ability via such measures as the TOEIC test, intensive in-service training in EFL methodology for all junior and senior high school teachers throughout Japan, and the creation of more than 100 accredited high schools throughout Japan known as 'Super English Language High Schools' (SELHi), for the purpose of creating and researching new and more effective ways of teaching English as a foreign language. The MEXT Action plan seems to reflect Funabashi's point of view in that standardized proficiency measures such as the TOEIC test are prominently mentioned as ways of gauging the effectiveness of the plan's implementation.

Although these government-sponsored initiatives may sound far-reaching, the results have been mixed. It has been argued that no matter what reform is introduced by MEXT, there are at least three major obstacles which prevent widespread curricular reform (Gorsuch 2001). These are the university entrance examination-oriented nature of classes which tend to focus on receptive skills or translation skills (Brown and Yamashita 1995; Kikuchi 2006); over-reliance on Yakudoku (grammar-translation) activities (Hino 1988; Gorsuch 1998); and a severe lack of pre-and in-service teacher training (Browne and Wada 1998; Kizuka 2006). For example,

with regard to this last point, although it is true that MEXT did provide funding for a five year in-service teacher training program, now that the program is complete, funding for further in-service teacher training is all but non-existent, exactly the same problematic situation that was faced before the MEXT plan was implemented.

Although there have been a number of studies which have looked at other factors which might affect Japanese' low proficiency in English such as lack of teacher training (O'Donnell 2005), poor quality of textbooks (Law 1994), entrance exams (Brown and Yamashita 1995, Watanabe 1997), very few studies have looked at the effect of the Ministry of Education's Course of Study Guidelines. The few studies which have examined their effect have only discussed the Guidelines from the point of view of the teacher (Browne and Wada 1998). The current study attempts to look at how well the goals of these guidelines have been implemented in the classroom from the point of view of the students. The first author of this paper experienced dissatisfaction with EFL classroom practice as a high school student in Japan. As a university teacher he began to wonder if the situation had changed. Since 1985, the second author, has worked with literally hundreds of high school teachers as a teacher trainer and researcher, and often observed that the Course of Study Guidelines, although a very important document, was often not fully implemented in the classroom. Based upon our previous experience and research, we felt that the actual implementation of the Course of Study Guidelines was something that needed to be explored more fully from the student perspective.

Research on English Education in Japanese High Schools

In a survey of 1200 senior high school English teachers in Chiba prefecture, Browne and Wada (1998) found that there was a clear lack of pre-service and in-service teacher training in ESL theory and methodology, with a large majority of teachers majoring in English literature (63%) rather than ESL/EFL (3%). As is argued by Bailey *et al.* (1996) and others, in the absence of good pre-service training, teachers tend to fall back on how they themselves were taught in school as a student, a phenomena known as 'the apprenticeship of teaching'. It is possible that the severe lack of teacher training in Japan is a contributing factor to the lasting impact of the grammar translation method since grammar-translation is how most teachers learned English when they were students, their 'apprenticeship of teaching'.

Another interesting finding of the Browne and Wada (1998) study was that one of the strongest influences on teacher practice (even stronger than

the influence of the Course of Study Guidelines), was the contents of the ministry approved textbooks. Given that ministry-approved textbooks are designed to prepare students to pass their college entrance exams and that all textbooks provide detailed teachers manuals which advocate teacher-fronted grammar translation methodologies, it is not surprising that this still remains the most popular method of teaching English. Amano (1990), gives a historical account of how this exam system has become so deeply embedded in both the society at large as well as the secondary education system within which teachers and students function, and White (1987) in a well known study of education in Japan points out that for parents and students alike, getting good grades on entrance exams is important above all else.

Gorsuch (2001) surveyed 876 Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) about their perceptions of the various influences which affected their classroom instruction. She found 4 key factors, which were: (1) approval of CLT methodology, (2) entrance exams, (3) informal classroom pressures and (4) formal school pressures. After looking at the interactional relationship of these four factors through the use of a structural equation model, she came to the conclusion that recent educational policies often lead teachers to focus their teaching practice on preparing students for the form-focused university exams.

Brown and Yamashita's (1995) widely quoted study of the readability of college entrance exams found that the reading passages used in Japan's top universities in 1994 were extremely difficult. Kikuchi (2006) replicated Brown and Yamashita's study in order to find out if there had been any change in the difficulty of the passages as a result of the changes in educational policy over the past decade. He found that both the readability of the passages as well as the type of items included on the test had changed little. Other studies (Browne 1996, 1998) have shown that the extreme difficulty of the high school reading textbooks which were used to prepare students for these exams may be a contributing factor to the failure of English education at the high school level, with the readability of Ministry-approved English textbooks often rated as far harder even than unsimplified texts for native speakers in terms of vocabulary difficulty.

Observing similar changes throughout countries in Asia, Nunan (2003) investigated recent curriculum change in seven countries including Japan, and made a call for research which looked at actual change in teaching practice in response to the impact of English becoming a global language. The study presented here is a response to this call since the Course of Study

Guidelines can be seen as an example of the Japanese government's response to the pressure or desire to teach English as a global language, and our research attempts to quantify the impact that these guidelines have had on classroom teaching in senior high schools throughout Japan.

Research Questions

There have been a variety of teacher and materials-focused studies which have identified factors such as the difficulty of entrance exams, textbook reading materials and a lack of teacher training as contributing to the problems related to senior high school English education in Japan. To the best of our knowledge, however, there have been no studies that directly asked students how they perceived their high school English program. What are recent high school graduates' views on the teaching practice of their schools? How do these views compare with the stated goals of the English Course of Study Guidelines? In order to continue to add baseline data to this little researched topic, the following research questions were posed:

- 1) What are student's perceptions of their teachers' classroom practice in the high school English classroom?
- 2) How well does classroom practice (as understood by students) support the stated goals related to teaching English for communicative purposes as stated in the Course of Study Guidelines?

Method

Participants

This study focused on recent high school graduates' perceptions of senior high school classroom practice connected with the implementation of the Course of Study Guidelines. To explore this question, we chose university students who had completed the mandatory six years of English study at junior and senior high school and asked them to report about their learning experiences. Although the study is concerned with perceptions of high school classroom pedagogy, it was decided to seek participants who were college freshmen rather than current high school students since we wanted to avoid adding to the many school and examination pressures that students face in their senior year of high school. The participants in this study were 112 learners of English (38 males and 74 females) from three private universities in Japan (School A, School B, and School C). They were students in classes taught by one of the authors during the spring semester of 2006.

Materials

In developing this survey, we began by closely examining the Course of Study Guidelines for senior high school English (MEXT 2003), and developed a 47 item survey that asked students about the main theoretical and pedagogic goals of the Guidelines for each type of English class taught in high school (English I and II, Oral Communication I and II, Reading and Writing). Each of the stated teaching goals in the Guidelines was rewritten to reflect the student's point of view. For example, in the Guideline's discussion of language activities for English I, one of the recommended teaching activities is 'To pronounce English with due attention to the basic characteristics of English sounds such as rhythm and intonation'. In order to create a question that would reflect the student's point of view regarding the implementation of this goal, students were asked to rate their level agreement with the following statement: 'In this class, our teacher helped us to develop our English pronunciation through rhythm and intonation practice'. Each of the rewritten objectives appears in the tables that follow.

The first part of the questionnaire gathered basic background information such as the participant's grade, age, sex, the type of high school graduated, and courses they took, and experience of staying outside Japan. The second part is the 47-item questionnaire about classroom implementation of the Guidelines. The instructions to the students regarding how to answer the questions can be translated into English as: 'We would like to gather information about the situation regarding the study of English in the high school classroom. Please reflect on the classes you took and indicate to what extent these statements are true for you. Answer based on your experience'.

Since there seems to be a tendency among Japanese learners to choose neutral responses on likert scale questions (Oishia, Hahn, Schimmack, Radhakrishnan, Dzokotoe and Ahadif 2005; Chen, Lee and Stevenson 1995) we chose to use a 6-point likert scale. In addition, at the end of each section, students were asked an open-ended question about their impressions and what they remembered about that particular class.

All instructions and items in the questionnaires were written in the participants' first language, that is, Japanese. The software SurveyMonkey (SurveyMonkey.com, 2006) was used to create the on-line questionnaire. On the Internet website, respondents were asked to answer the questions. A specific website address was created for the survey so that access was restricted to only the desired participants. After respondents completed the questionnaire, the researchers were able to access the raw data for each respondent as well as basic descriptive statistics.

Procedures

We asked participants to complete the questionnaire from between April and July, 2006. In all cases, the survey was administered during class time. The participants were given the web address of the site for the survey and asked to respond. In most cases it took approximately 15 to 20 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Their responses were stored on the server. From the website, the data was imported to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. At the bottom of the survey there was a place which allowed students to opt out of the survey should they decide they didn't agree with the stated purpose of the research (N = 4). Since it is not common practice in Japan to gather signatures for consent to participate in classroom research, we decided to include a checkbox on the survey for students who did not want their responses to be included in the study.

Analysis

Possible responses on the likert scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Thus, the greater the number, the stronger the agreement by participants with the statement regarding teaching practice. In light of the fact that Japanese learners tend to choose neutral responses on likert scale questions, we chose to compare the strongly agree responses (5 or 6 on the likert scale) with strongly disagree responses (1 or 2 on the likert scale), focusing mainly on responses where there was a large disparity between the strongly agree and strongly disagree statements.

Results

We begin this section with a discussion of the quantitative data generated by student responses to the likert-scale questions. Table 1 presents results for the four questions in the survey regarding the overall objectives of the Course of Study Guidelines. Table 2 presents results for questions related to objectives for the English I course. Table 3 is for the English II course, Table 4 for the Oral Communication I course, Table 5 the Oral Communication II course, Table 6 the Reading course and Table 7 the Writing course.

The number of respondents for each course is given following the title of each table. In order to make trends in the data easier to understand, we have combined strongly disagree responses (1 and 2 on the likert scale), neutral responses (3 and 4), and strongly agree responses (5 and 6). These percentages are given in brackets below the raw number of students who

chose each response on the likert scale. This is followed by a brief discussion of qualitative responses to the open-ended questions.

Quantitative Results

Table 1. *Students' Views on Overall Objectives (n=90)*

Overall objectives of the high school English classes		Disagree ←→Agree					
<i>In high school English classes that I took...</i>		1	2	3	4	5	6
1	I studied how to use English to communicate about everyday topics.	14 (53%)	34	22 (41%)	15	4 (6%)	1
2	The way I was taught English helped me to have a more positive attitude about studying English.	11 (31%)	17	21 (48%)	22	14 (21%)	5
3	The way I was taught English helped me to be better able to convey my ideas in English.	20 (61%)	35	15 (33%)	15	5 (6%)	0
4	The way I was taught English helped me to be better able to understand English better.	12 (44%)	28	24 (44%)	16	9 (11%)	1

With regard to the overall objectives of the course of study, results in Table 1 show that a much higher percentage of students (53%) disagreed with the statement that English was taught to help them to communicate in English about everyday topics than those that agreed (6%). The disparity was even larger for item 3, where 61% of the learners strongly disagreed with the statement that the way they were taught English helped them to convey their ideas better, while only 6% agreed.

Table 2: *Students' Views on English I Objectives (n=79)*

English I		Disagree ←→Agree					
<i>In this class, our teacher...</i>		1	2	3	4	5	6
5	helped us to develop a positive attitude about speaking/writing in English about everyday topics.	24 (59%)	23	18 (33%)	8	6 (8%)	0
6	helped us to develop our English pronunciation through rhythm and intonation practice.	17 (55%)	26	17 (38%)	13	4 (6%)	1

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7	didn't spend too much time on long analysis and explanation of English.	9 (38%)	21	21 (44%)	14	9 (18%)	5
8	put a strong emphasis on how English should be used in real situations and helped us to do so.	16 (63%)	33	20 (32%)	5	3 (5%)	1
9	had us discuss and exchange opinions in English about ideas in reading and listening activities.	26 (68%)	28	17 (25%)	3	3 (5%)	1
10	asked us to listen to English to understand information/the speaker's intentions and grasp the main points.	10 (35%)	17	16 (45%)	19	14 (19%)	1
11	asked us to read English in order to understand information/ the writer's intentions and to grasp the main points.	5 (22%)	12	13 (50%)	26	14 (28%)	8
12	asked us to organize and write down information obtained by listening/reading or our own ideas.	11 (49%)	27	24 (41%)	8	7 (10%)	1

The results in Table 2 refer to students' views on the objectives of the English I course. In item 5, a majority of students strongly disagree (59%) with the statement that English I was taught in a way that helped them to develop a more positive attitude about speaking and writing in English. They also expressed strong disagreement with the statement that English I helped them to develop their pronunciation skills (55%) and the statement that English was taught in a way that emphasized how it should be used in real situations (63%). A large number of learners (49%) also said that they were not asked to organize or write down information obtained by listening and reading tasks.

Table 3: *Students' Views on English II Objectives (n=72)*

English II <i>In this class, our teacher...</i>	Disagree ←→ Agree					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
13 helped us to develop a positive attitude about speaking/writing in English about everyday topics.	21 (61%)	23	14 (32%)	9	5 (7%)	0
14 helped us to develop our English pronunciation through rhythm and intonation practice.	12 (44%)	19	19 (47%)	14	5 (9%)	1
15 didn't spend too much time on long analysis and explanation of English.	9 (40%)	20	19 (42%)	11	8 (18%)	5

16	put a strong emphasis on how English should be used in real situations and helped us to do so.	16 (54%)	22	22 (39%)	6	3 (7%)	2
17	had us discuss and exchange opinions in English about the ideas in reading and listening activities.	28 (63%)	17	14 (31%)	8	3 (7%)	2
18	asked us to listen to English to understand information/the speaker's intentions and grasp the main points.	10 (45%)	21	14 (39%)	13	9 (16%)	2
19	asked us to read English in order to understand information/ the writer's intentions and to grasp the main points.	5 (31%)	17	16 (42%)	14	16 (28%)	4
20	asked us to organize and write down information obtained by listening/reading or our own ideas.	15 (50%)	21	22 (43%)	9	5 (7%)	0

With regard to the English II class, item 13 of Table 3 shows that a majority of students (61%) didn't feel that the English II class helped them to develop a positive attitude about speaking and writing in English about everyday topics. This is very similar to the reaction students had to the English I course, given in Table 2. A strongly negative response was also given in item 16, about whether or not English was taught in a way that emphasized how it should be used in real situations, with 54% disagreeing. In item 17, 63% also disagreed with the statement that the teacher taught the class in a way that allowed them to discuss and exchange opinions in English about the ideas in reading and listening activities.

Table 4: *Students' Views on Oral Communication I Objectives (n=68)*

Oral Communication I		Disagree ←→ Agree					
<i>In this class, our teacher...</i>		1	2	3	4	5	6
21	introduced English in authentic situations so that we could practice giving/receiving information.	13 (33%)	9	18 (51%)	16	9 (16%)	2
22	helped us to have a more positive attitude about communicating in English about everyday topics.	10 (34%)	12	15 (56%)	21	4 (9%)	2
23	had us ask and answer questions in English about topics that were of interest to us.	14 (30%)	6	15 (49%)	18	12 (21%)	2

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24	helped us to develop my English pronunciation through rhythm and intonation practice.	9 (36%)	15	11 (42%)	17	11 (22%)	4
25	introduced us to nonverbal means of communication (for e.g. gestures/body language).	14 (45%)	16	22 (45%)	8	2 (10%)	5
26	didn't spend too much time on long analysis and explanation of English.	4 (21%)	10	17 (45%)	13	15 (33%)	7
27	put a strong emphasis on how English should be used in real situations and helped us to do so.	11 (33%)	11	17 (45%)	13	11 (22%)	4
28	taught us the English expressions I needed for engaging in communicative activities.	8 (30%)	12	25 (49%)	8	11 (21%)	3

Table 4 refers to students' Views on Oral Communication I Objectives. Although the results are not as clear-cut as in the first three tables, for 7 out of the 8 questions a much larger percentage of students felt that the teacher was not effectively implementing the course of study objectives. Only item 26, which asked whether or not teachers spent too much time explaining and analyzing English were there more positive student responses (33%) than negative ones (21%).

Table 5: *Students' Views on Oral Communication II Objectives (n=26)*

Oral Communication II		Disagree ←→ Agree					
<i>In this class, our teacher...</i>		1	2	3	4	5	6
29	helped us to understand the main points of speeches and express our ideas about them.	5 (56%)	9	4 (28%)	3	4 (16%)	0
30	often asked us to discuss or debate a wide variety of topics.	6 (56%)	8	6 (40%)	4	1 (4%)	0
31	taught us the English expressions for doing presentations, discussions and debate.	5 (40%)	5	7 (60%)	8	0 (0%)	0
32	helped us to organize and present information and ideas about a wide variety of topics effectively.	5 (58%)	10	5 (35%)	4	2 (8%)	0
33	often asked us to create and perform skits in English.	7 (72%)	11	2 (20%)	3	2 (8%)	0
34	helped us to take notes while listening to organized utterances when necessary.	7 (64%)	9	6 (32%)	2	1 (4%)	0

Table 5 refers to Students' Views on Oral Communication II Objectives. Student assessment of how teachers implemented the Course of Study Guideline goals for this class was strongly negative across the board, with very few students stating that they felt the goals were being adequately implemented. For example, question 29, which had the largest positive response (16%), also had 56% of the students with strong negative responses. In fact, for four out of the five questions regarding Oral Communication II, students gave strong negative responses which exceeded 50%.

Table 6: *Students' Views on Reading Objectives (n=73)*

Reading <i>In this class, our teacher...</i>		Disagree ←→Agree					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
35	helped us to read texts in order to obtain necessary information to make outlines and summaries.	8 (26%)	11	15 (44%)	17	12 (29%)	9
36	helped us to read texts in order to understand the writer's intentions and to organize and transmit our own ideas about them.	14 (44%)	18	17 (48%)	18	4 (8%)	2
37	helped us to read stories etc. and talk or write about our impressions.	24 (56%)	16	17 (36%)	9	5 (8%)	1
38	helped us to read passages aloud so that the content and our interpretations can be transmitted to the listener.	16 (44%)	16	18 (41%)	12	9 (15%)	2
39	helped us to read passages while guessing the meanings of unknown words and utilizing background knowledge.	7 (28%)	13	16 (49%)	19	10 (24%)	7
40	helped us to read passages while paying attention to the key-words, phrases, sentences, or the structure/development of paragraphs etc.	4 (18%)	9	11 (40%)	18	17 (42%)	14
41	helped us to read appropriately, such as rapid or intensive reading, in accordance with the purpose and the situation.	7 (33%)	17	15 (47%)	19	9 (21%)	6

With regard to the implementation of Guideline objectives related to high school reading courses, students appeared to be somewhat less dissatisfied than they were with their other classes. Although 5 out of 7 questions had more students responding negatively than positively, the percentage gap between strongly negative and strongly positive responses was much smaller than it was with regard to other courses. In fact, in four out of eight of the questions, the neutral response had the highest percentage. The only questions where there were noticeably large gaps were questions 36 through 38. In question 36, 44% of the students felt that the lessons did not help them to understand the writer's intentions, nor to be able to discuss their ideas about them, while only 8% did.

Question 37, which asked if teachers had helped students to be able to write or say their impressions about the stories they were reading revealed that 56% of the students said their teachers did not help them to do this while only 8% said they did. Question 38, asked if the teacher helped students to read out loud in a way that allowed the contents be transmitted to a listener. Only 15% of the students felt that the teacher helped with this while 44% did not.

Table 7: *Students' Views on Writing Objectives (n=75)*

Writing		Disagree ←→Agree					
		1	2	3	4	5	6
42	<i>In this class, our teacher... asked us to write down the outline and the main points of what has been listened to or read in accordance with the situation and the purpose.</i>	11 (41%)	20	17 (44%)	16	9 (15%)	2
43	<i>asked us to organize and write down my ideas etc. of what has been listened to or read.</i>	12 (48%)	24	16 (44%)	17	4 (8%)	2
44	<i>asked us to organize and write down our intended messages in accordance with the situation and the purpose so that they can be understood by the reader.</i>	12 (40%)	18	19 (41%)	12	9 (16%)	3
45	<i>helped us to be able to write down sentences that are spoken or read aloud.</i>	14 (48%)	22	12 (37%)	16	8 (15%)	3

46	helped us to utilize necessary words phrases and expressions to transmit ideas and feelings.	12 (39%)	17	16 (51%)	22	7 (11%)	1
47	helped us to write while paying attention to the structure and development of passages.	4 (29%)	18	14 (44%)	19	11 (27%)	9

With regard to the implementation of writing objectives, in every question, students gave significantly higher negative than positive response, with the percentage of strongly negative responses being between double and triple the strongly positive responses in all questions but 47. For example, in both questions 43 and 46 where the objectives seem to be connected with helping students to either write down or express their ideas and feelings, students had a far higher negative than positive response rate, indicating that this type of activity was not emphasized. In questions 42 and 44, two to three times as many students strongly disagreed than strongly agreed that teachers were helping them to be able to write down or outline the main points of either what they had read or listened to or what they want to say.

Qualitative Results

The findings of the quantitative data were generally supported by the qualitative data generated by the open-ended questions appearing at the end of each section of the survey. In each case, after responding to the likert scale questions, students were also asked to express what they remembered about each course in the space provided. In total, we received 76 comments (English I = 11, English II = 11, OCI = 13, OCII = 4, Reading = 11, and writing = 13). While analysing the data obtained from these questions, three common themes emerged: That courses tended to be either college entrance examination-oriented (10 times), grammar translation-oriented (7 times), or textbook-oriented (7 times).

For example, with regard to English I (a four-skill class commonly taught to senior high school freshmen), a comment which echoed the sentiment expressed by many others regarding the entrance exam centered nature of the class was as follows: *'I feel sad since I don't remember anything specific about this class since it was completely focused on preparing us for the college entrance exam. It was just about memorization, so although I gained some knowledge, we never practiced using English'*. Another English I comment, this time focused on being grammar-

translation oriented, was as follows: ‘*Our only classroom activity was working very hard on translating the contents of the textbook*’. A typical comment among those noticing the textbook-oriented nature of the class, again from an English I student, was as follows: ‘*The class was painful! It just followed the contents of the textbook*’. As can be seen from the representative comments given above, most responses tended to be negative ones.

Discussion

1. What are students’ perceptions of their teachers’ classroom practice in the high school English classroom?

With regard to the first research question, the overall trend in the data clearly indicates that students didn’t feel that the goals of the Course of Study Guidelines were being effectively implemented by their teachers in the classroom. For example, students had a very strong negative reaction to statements such as ‘I studied how to use English to communicate about everyday topics’ (53% strongly disagreed), ‘Our teacher had us discuss and exchange opinions in English about reading and listening activities’ (68% strongly disagreed), and ‘Our teacher put a strong emphasis on how English should be used in real situations and helped us to do so’ (53% strongly disagreed).

One obvious hindrance to the implementation of these goals, one which was often mentioned in the qualitative section of the survey, was the overwhelming pressure that *Juken Eigo* (English for entrance exams) places on the teacher. Butler and Iino (2005), seem to support this conclusion in their discussion of the 2003 MEXT Action Plan, where they argued that while the communicative goals set out by the Action Plan were both concrete and measurable, the effectiveness of the plan remains to be seen since it is itself in ideological conflict with government policies and a system that favors traditional *Juken Eigo* approaches.

For example, in Table 7, which pertained to the writing class, results showed that not one of the communicative objectives related to writing was actually being implemented in the classroom. This begs the question, what kinds of activities were being done. Responses in the qualitative open-ended questions indicate that the primary focus of these classes were on the memorization of grammatical structures and long explanations by the teacher on usage, in other words, *Juken Eigo*. Two students even went as far as to state that they felt the main purpose of the class was to simply prepare them for passing the entrance exam. Although this survey did not

address this question directly, there is a large body of research (e.g. Gorsuch 1998) which indicates that the primary means of teaching reading and writing in the classroom is *yakudoku* (grammar translation).

2. *How well does classroom practice (as understood by students) support the stated goals related to teaching English for communicative purposes as stated in the Course of Study Guidelines?*

As was seen by the three sample comments given by students from the English I class, even first year high school students are already clearly feeling that their English classes were not being taught for communicative purposes. In fact, two out of the thirteen comments given by students taking the Oral Communication I class complained about the fact that what they did in class was not related to the development of their oral skills in English. One student clearly stated: '*we only did oral activities once or twice a year at most*', and another that '*we seldom had any opportunity to speak—almost everything we did was related to reading*'. The practice of ignoring the communicative goals of the Oral Communication I class is so widespread that it is now derisively known in many circles as the Oral Communication "G" class, since the focus is only on 'grammar in preparation for college entrance exams' (Yoshida 2003: 291).

This interpretation is also clearly supported by the quantitative data, which, as can be seen from the result section above, had a very strong general trend towards disagreeing with any statement about a course of study guideline goal being positively implemented in the classroom. The trend was even more pronounced when focusing on the specific questions connected to whether or not students had a positive attitude about studying English for communicative purposes (Table 1, items 1 and 2; Table 2, items 5, 8 and 9; Table 3; items 13 and 16; Table 4, items 21 and 22).

The results of this and other studies looking at the implementation of the Course of Study Guidelines (Browne and Wada 1998; Gorsuch 2001), have shown there is strong evidence that Hiraizumi's argument about the overwhelming influence of college entrance exams was right, that it is the very presence of the exams themselves, not the Course of Study Guidelines, which necessitated the use of difficult reading passages, grammar translation and memorization, and has had the strongest effect on teaching practice.

Conclusion

In this study, there was clear evidence of a gap between the stated goals of the ministry's course of study guidelines and actual teaching practice in

the high school English classroom. Although it is true that the stated goals of these guidelines clearly emphasize the importance of developing students' communicative competence, it seems equally true that Japanese teachers of English, for whatever the underlying reasons may be, are either unwilling or unable to teach English in a communicative manner. It also seems clear, however, that one way or another, this situation will have to be addressed soon. A MEXT subcommittee for the Central Council for Education, an advisory panel to the education, science and technology minister, recently announced (*Hasshinryoku*, 2007) that due to the poor results in implementing the course of study guidelines in the Oral Communication I and English 1 classes, they will eventually be discontinued and combined into one new class which will be called 'Communication English'. At the same time, the committee announced another draft proposal ('Education panel', 2007) which would require all university students to achieve a minimum level of communicative ability in Japanese and foreign languages such as English before being allowed to graduate. These two proposals seem likely to increase the pressure on teachers at all levels to help develop students' communicative ability.

As for teacher development, we feel that the increased emphasis on in-service teacher development under the 2003 Action Plan helped to address a long overdue concern—a lack of regular in-service development and support for English teachers. Many are concerned about what will happen next now that the five year intensive training program has come to an end and there have been no announcements of funding for in-service training in the future. We are somewhat encouraged, however, by another recent announcement by a subcommittee of MEXT about a new requirement that all English teachers should undergo at least 30 hours of teacher training over each ten-year period of their career in order to maintain their certification (MEXT 2007). We believe that such a requirement would increase the pressure on both teachers as well as local boards of education to become more involved with ongoing teacher development.

This study was exploratory in nature, surveying 112 college freshmen, shortly after they were admitted into several private universities in Tokyo and Shizuoka. Although it only took into account the student's point of view, and didn't acknowledge the hard-working and dedicated nature of Japanese high school teachers, its purpose was to shed light on the complex relationship between government policy and actual classroom practice. We suggest that future research should expand the sampling, and further explore any gaps between the stated goals of the guidelines and

actual classroom practices. As was mentioned above, this study is a response to call to Nunan's (2003) call for research which shows the complicated gap between educational policies and actual teaching practice. With the 2008 release of the Course of Study Guidelines for elementary and junior high schools, the high school Course of Study Guidelines are soon to follow. We hope that the high school Course of Study Guidelines for English classes will be realistic enough to implement easily in actual classrooms, and that teachers will be provided with adequate training, so that they will have the proper pedagogic tools at their disposal when they try to respond to calls for teaching English more communicatively.

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