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(Accepted on October 1st, 2008)

1. Introduction

In 2008, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT*) announced a New Japanese National Curriculum. It is the seventh National Curriculum issued after the end of World War II, and is understood to have new ideas proposed in view of changes and advancements in global society known as globalization. The curriculum for junior high schools, in particular, reveals important changes such as focusing on the keyword “Social Life” and referencing to the media that have spread in daily life, including newspaper and internet. These changes are often interpreted in association with the objective of curriculum in synchronic perspective. However, such changes are rooted also in the philosophy that has dominated the structure and content of the Japanese language education. The purpose of this paper is to elucidate the significance of the proposed Japanese National Curriculum 2008 by means of reviewing the characteristics and history of post-war Japanese language education.

2. Overview of the current Japanese language education in Japan

Firstly, the social context of the situation surrounding Japanese language education is outlined.

The results of a research conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2002 show that the literacy rate of adults of both sexes in Japan are 99.8%.

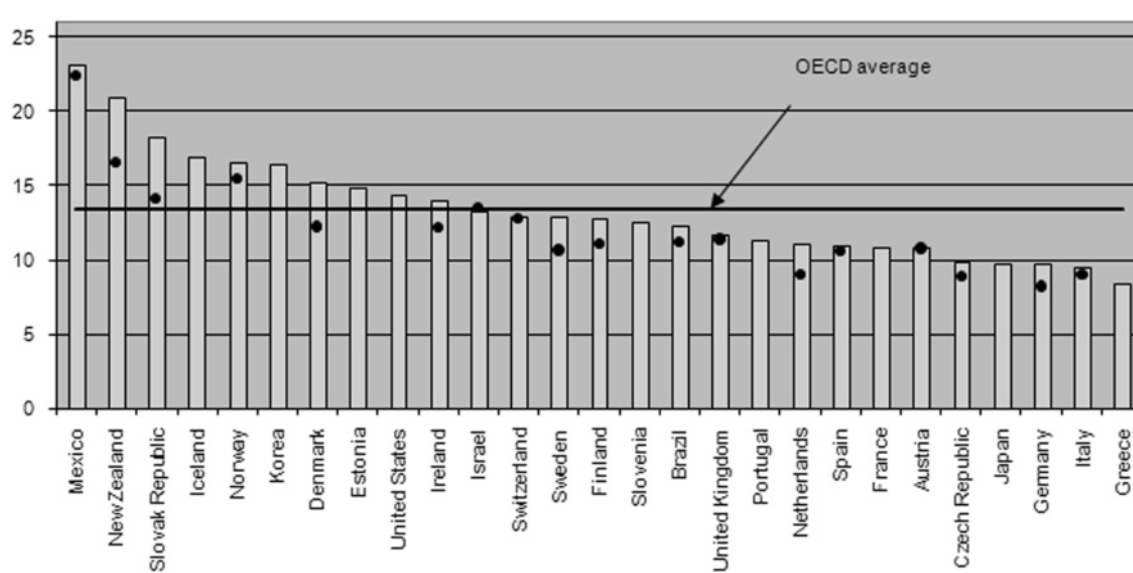
One of the features of the linguistic culture in Japan is that more emphasis is placed on written language than on spoken language. In Japanese language class at school in Japan, a major focus has traditionally tended to be put on reading and writing. There are four types of characters in Japanese: **hiragana**, **katakana**, **kanji** (Chinese characters), and the Roman alphabet called Romaji. **Kanji** is the most complicated style of writing among them. Schoolchildren are expected to learn 1006 **kanji** characters while attending elementary school, which lasts for six years.

Hiragana and **katakana** are characterized by less difference between transcription and phonology. Even those who have difficulty in learning by using **kanji** may understand sentences by the use of **hiragana** and **katakana**. This has led to the situation in which dyslexia, an increasingly serious problem in the native-language education in the English-speaking countries, has not been apparent in the Japanese-speaking society.

Japan's educational administration is based on a closely linked bureaucratic network encompassing

the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT), prefectural boards of education, municipal boards of education, supervisors of school education, and schools.

According to a survey conducted in 2004, the ratio of public expenditure on education (for all educational stages) to total general government expenditure was 9.8% for Japan and 14.4% for the United States. (Education at a Glance 2007: OECD Indicators). These figures are lower in Japan than the averages of OECD, indicating that the school education in Japan is operated at lower cost than in the United States. Although the necessity to increase investments in education is claimed by MEXT and other organizations, the amount of investments in education has been maintained at a low level due to opposition from the Ministry of Finance in the current policy debate.



Countries are ranked in descending order of total public expenditure on education at all levels of education as a percentage of total public expenditure in 2004.

Source: OECD. Table B4.1. See Annex 3 for notes (www.oecd.org/edu/eag2007).

The legally-binding government-approved Japanese National Curriculum, which guides the curriculum in elementary, middle, and high schools, has been revised by the MEXT approximately every ten years. The new version of the Japanese National Curriculum was released in 2008.

Textbook publishers develop new textbooks based on the revision of the Japanese National Curriculum. New textbooks are screened for approval by the MEXT. Only textbooks that passed the screening and managed to gain the approval of the MEXT are allowed to be used officially.

Textbook publishers produce new textbooks with their own unique features, but their format characteristics such as page size and total number of pages are almost the same. For example, the page size of the textbooks for sixth-graders is B5, and their total number of page is 250. In addition, they are supposed to be published in two volumes. Therefore, it is physically impossible for the textbooks to contain long novels or articles.

The basic premise is that, in principle, all schools (both private and public) in Japan are required to use mainly MEXT-approved textbooks in classes. The educational system based on the Japanese National Curriculum and MEXT-approved textbooks has functioned as a means to ensure the appropriate quantity on reading and writing of the contents of learning in Japanese schools.

Textbooks are supplied free of charge to students in compulsory education. Textbooks for compulsory education are selected not by individual schools but by local (municipal) boards of education. Textbook publishers sell manuals and workbooks for teachers as well, which completely correspond to their textbooks, and many schools buy such print materials. These manuals specifically state what kinds of questions should be asked and what kinds of explanations should be offered in class. In elementary schools in Japan, one teacher, in principle, teaches all subjects except for music and art. Accordingly, consideration has been given so that even teachers who do not specialize in Japanese language education or have less experience can teach roughly what students are supposed to learn in Japanese language class.

Like this, the teaching methods have been standardized in manuals. At the same time, however, the teachers' culture in Japan has placed great emphasis on self-initiated efforts to improve their teaching skills. Many teachers participate in voluntary training programs in addition to publicly-mandated programs. For example, "Lesson Study" is conducted as part of an in-school training program, in which teachers invite other teachers to observe their teaching to receive their feedback and then exchange their opinions to study the teaching and learning process in school.

Almost all elementary, junior, and senior high schools do not have a classroom designated for Japanese language education. In principle, students learn multiple subjects with the same group of students in the same room. The sizes and shapes of the classrooms at all Japanese schools are almost the same. According to the results of a survey conducted in 2005, the average class size in primary education in Japan and in the United States is 28.4 and 23.1 children per class respectively. (Education at a Glance 2007: OECD Indicators). In an international comparison, Japan's classrooms are in the third worst situation, following Korea and Chile. The question of how to conduct classes effectively under limited conditions is an unavoidable issue for teachers in Japan.

There are alternative organizations and research results provided through collaboration between teachers and researchers, which is based on labor unions and other groups, to oppose the MEXT and the Japanese National Curriculum. The conflict between the two opposing forces was apparent during the period between mid-1950s and 1970s. However, since the establishment of collaborative relationships between the MEXT and the Japan Teachers' Union in 1995, the alternative forces have weakened.

The Japanese National Curriculum has provided the list of the contents of learning for each school grade. The National Institute for Educational Policy Research issued a recommendation regarding the criteria for assessing academic achievement in 2003. The national achievement tests for both sixth graders and ninth graders were conducted by the MEXT in 2007 for the first time in more than 40 years. The national tests are now scheduled to be conducted every year. At present, the results of the tests are used only as data to identify the achievements and problems of the educational measures in each region and to improve the measures.

3. Start of Post-War Japanese language education

One of the characteristics of educational theories in modern Japan is that quite a number of these theories were imported from abroad or formulated by imitating other nations' educational theories. Even theories that seem to be unique to Japan were developed by digesting the contents of the theories that were obtained from abroad. From this perspective, the impact of the educational theories that came from the United States after the end of World War II in 1945 was enormous. The First United States Education Mission to Japan was sent at the request of the General Headquarters of the Allied Forces (GHQ). The report released by the mission in March 1946 emphasized the importance of actively introducing discussion into the education in Japan. It said that if discussion was guided by competent teachers, it would be allow young generations to continue to protect what is good, regardless of whether it is old or new. Immediately after the World War II, the greatest emphasis was placed on the development of people who support and work for democracy. The intellectual backbone was based mainly on John Dewey's theories. In accordance with the principle of his democratic education theories, discussion was introduced as a means of allowing schools to function as a seed bed for nurturing people who support and work for democracy. Discussion should have been used in homeroom activities and in the classes of all subjects as a learning method. However, since both teachers and students had almost no experience in discussion, it was hoped that Japanese language classes would play an active role in allowing discussion to take root in Japan.

Following advice from the Civil Information and Education Section (CIE) of the GHQ, which was in charge of education in post-war Japan, the first Japanese National Curriculum (a tentative proposal, and was then described as a "course of study" in general) after the end of World War II was announced in 1947. The curriculum emphasized the association with the real world and recommended a learning approach that includes various linguistic activities for each course of study. In addition, it stressed the importance of critically understanding the information transmitted through the mass media. Under the influence of Helen Heffernan (1896-1987), who was dispatched to the CIE from the California State Department of Education, and others, educational theories that put more emphasis on experiential and progressive approaches were introduced to Japanese people. In 1948, classes were conducted on an experimental basis at a progressive elementary school in Tokyo. The experiment was performed in the course of study that focused on "Newspapers and Radio." In the classes, nearly 100 hours were spent on research activities and discussions. Nine reports were published on the experiment. Some were published as a book on education, and others were as a thesis on education. This fact shows the high interest of teachers and educators of that time in the experiment. In the elementary school, learning activities were centered around social studies, but they went beyond the boundaries of academic subjects. It was hoped that the Japanese language education would enable students to develop their linguistic communication skills. (Nakamura, 2003)

4. Dissemination of systematic and meritocratic approaches

When the San Francisco Peace Treaty was signed in 1951, Japan made a fresh start as an independent state. Coincidentally, a backlash occurred against the educational systems and theories that had been imported from the United States after the defeat of World War II. The authority of the Ministry of Education was

strengthened. Criticism against experiential and progressive education theories, which were symbolized by “course of study,” grew stronger. As the change in American policy toward Japan during the post-World War II reconstruction, which was called “Reverse Course,” gathered momentum, systematic and meritocratic education theories drew a lot of attention as part of educational measures to spur Japan’s economic growth. (Duke, 1964) Edwin Reischauer (1910–1990) who was known for his in-depth knowledge of Japanese society gave a warning about such structural changes of educational measures, that the “Japanese education system has become in some ways more thoroughly dominated by the government today than it was before the War” (Reischauer, 1957, p.268). In line with the systematic approach that excludes trivial issues, more value was put on the curriculum aimed at enabling students to develop their competence through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. A policy of developing human resources who would contribute to economic growth was strongly promoted, and a goal was set to achieve a consistent level of education across the country. Until then, The Japanese National Curriculum had been regarded as a “tentative proposal” under the policy of valuing decentralization of authority to local governments, based on an advice from the United States. However, the Japanese National Curriculum 1958 acquired a legally binding force.

While textbooks started to be used as the major instructional tools in classes, efforts to standardize teaching methods nationwide were made. The concept of “efficiency” was introduced in the field of education, just as in the industrial sector. Minoru Koshimizu (1908–1986), one of the leading researchers of that time, criticized the experiential and progressive education theories that were imported from the United States.

The language life is truly a comprehensive concept. When we apply the concept to education, daily life activities rather than the functional and behavioral aspects of the language life will be brought to education. For example, in a course on how to make a telephone call, students will end up learning how to put the receiver down. And in a reading class, they may end up learning how to handle books. Like this, various impurities or irrelevant matters will be brought into Japanese-language education. It can be said that these impurities can make education more specific and lively. Yet, this idea belongs to the period for life-unit learning. If these theories are applied, the scope of the academic guidance for Japanese language education will continue to expand endlessly and its core will disappear. (Koshimizu, 1968, p.102)

Koshimizu stressed the importance of “purification” of learning contents, which excludes the “impurities” of the real world. In addition, he proposed a basic teaching process by relying on various academic theories on skills based on the “stimulus response” theory, which was advocated in the United States. One of the reasons why the education in Japan attracted international attention as a successful example until 1980s was attributed to the “purification.”

Benjamin C. Duke, an accomplished scholar in comparative education who was born in the United States, published a book titled *The Japanese School* in 1986. In it, he praised the high rate of literacy achieved by the schools in Japan in comparison with the low level of literacy at that time in his country. At the same time, he noticed that the Japanese language classes that contributed to Japan’s high literacy rate were a “continual process of memorization, repetition, drilling, and testing.” He also noted that the imagination of learners was not stimulated in the classes, with the result that these classes were “deadly dull.”

The typical secondary school teacher, for example, rather faithfully follows the teacher's guide by painfully poring over the lesson sentence by sentence, dissecting it for meaning, analyzing nuances, and repeating the meanings of new characters. A student is called upon to stand and read a passage. He then promptly sits down. Seldom is a discussion conducted. Seldom do the student ask questions. (Duke, 1986, p.64)

In the classes referred in the book, emphasis was put on how to understand the contents of textbooks accurately, and no attention was paid to critical reading, expression of personal opinions, and discussion. It is believed in Japan that since textbooks have been strictly screened by the Ministry of Education, students can learn "appropriate" subject contents if they accept what textbooks say as it is. What lies behind this belief is naïve understanding of general culture education, which places too much confidence in textbooks. What works in a classroom does not necessarily work in the real world. Adverse effects of the systematic and meritocratic education theories based on extreme "purification" are obvious.

5. Necessity of educational reform and its current status

The problems with the Japanese language education have always drawn criticism, and alternatives have constantly been proposed to solve them in Japan. And there are those who have re-discovered the advantages of experiential and progressive education theories and strongly advocate them. Information on teaching and learning activities in other countries has been introduced to teachers in Japan. For example, the following educational activities in other countries have always attracted a lot of interest: the whole language movement in the United States, the media literacy movement in Canada, native language textbooks in Finland, which has been consistently ranked on the top of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study undertaken by the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). However, even if Japanese teachers want to apply the new ideas that they have learned from these overseas educational activities to their classes, they cannot do that due to the extremely strong framework of the Japanese National Curriculum and MEXT-approved textbooks. New attempts tend to be short-term one-off projects. Additionally, the following circumstances stand in the way of teachers in Japan: no subject classroom, large number of students per class, busy workload of teachers, and insufficient education budgets. This situation explains why educational reform cannot be initiated successfully from the bottom up at the grass roots level. In view of the need for institutional reform in Japan, it is essential to establish organic collaboration with educational reform at the governmental level.

It is not that the Japanese educational administration has been standing idly by while these problems occur. In 1994, the MEXT proposed the "new view of academic achievement," which aimed at bringing the education in Japan out of one-way teaching from teachers to students. And the ministry stressed the importance of the view of academic achievement that promotes the development of students' willingness to learn and positions, as the basis of academic ability, willingness to learn independently, ability to think, decision-making ability, and ability to express oneself. As an extension of the view, the MEXT released the Japanese National Curriculum 1998, in which communication was positioned again as one of the core elements of Japanese language education. The emphasis on the importance of communication was right on the mark, but the

practical content for communication education was not sufficient. For example, consideration to communication in the real world, which was proposed by James Moffett in his book titled *Teaching the Universe of Discourse* and swept across the world in 1970s, was not significant enough. As the influence of systematic and meritocratic education theories was still strong, the intention of the Japanese National Curriculum 1998 was not fully understood in some cases. Even under such circumstances, it was recognized that communication was enhanced among students in classes although communication was not facilitated in the real world. In this respect, it can be said that progress was made. In this way, the top-down education reform has changed the native language education in Japan although the process is gradual.

6. Background behind the formation of the New Japanese National Curriculum

When Japan entered the 21st century, its educational circles were disturbed by a “decline of academic ability.” The results of a private survey covering a limited number of subjects were reported uncritically by the mass media, and the sense of crisis was strongly exacerbated. Amid this furor, the results of the 2003 PISA were announced in December 2004, and it revealed a decline in the reading literacy of Japanese students. Since Japanese people have a tendency to be sensitive to overseas trends, the released results further intensified the discussion about the “decline of academic ability” in the education of their native language. The news media in Japan did not report much about the intention of the PISA survey and how the students answered the questions. Instead, it concentrated primarily on the decline of the reading literacy. In addition, the news media reported the comments of various Japanese experts and authorities about the issues. Quite a number of these commentators ignored the intention of the survey and loudly proclaimed the usefulness of recitation and drills. Such anachronistic and retrograde opinions may indicate that the desire still remains strong in this country to experience success again by relying on the educational theories that supported Japan during the period of high economic growth.

In the meantime, the impact of the PISA 2003 survey on researchers in Japanese-language education was enormous in another sense. This is because more Japanese became aware of the gap between the Japanese language education in Japan and native language education in other countries, which was revealed by the PISA survey, by experiencing the full-scale international comparison research on native-language education for the first time. The Japanese National Curriculum and educational theories in Japan have not been able to sufficiently address the question of how its native language education can deal with contemporary issues facing the current stage of society, which is called “highly-sophisticated information society” or “knowledge-based society.” Accordingly, some researchers started to pay attention to the findings of studies on literacy, including media literacy, critical literacy and multiliteracies, in other countries. In particular, a full-fledged study about media literacy and media education in UK, Australia, and Canada was launched in 2000. It is expected to provide a key to open new horizons in the native-language education and to elucidate the essence of reading literacy by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA).

The various good and bad opinions function as a pressure on the MEXT, and they exerted a direct and indirect influence on the process of examining the content of the National Curriculum. The main features of the Japanese National Curriculum 2008 are as follows.

Effective participation in society
 Focusing on the keyword “Social Life”
 Referencing to the media that have spread in daily life, including newspaper and internet
 Emphasis on book-reading activities
 Respect to language culture
 Expansion of text, including multimedia such as images

7. Significance of the Japanese National Curriculum 2008

The emphasis of the latest curriculum on effective participation in society indicates the influence of the above-mentioned PISA survey. The new curriculum offered measures to deal with the progress and expansion of media and texts in the real world. It can be considered that the MEXT took global and local trends into consideration to propose an appropriate way culture and knowledge should be handled in the new curriculum. It may also be inferred that the findings of various studies on literacy influenced its content. Particular attention should be paid to the important point that this Curriculum may involve the possibility to function as a new paradigm different from the philosophy which has controlled the structure and content of Japanese language education-namely the philosophy symbolized by the word “purification”.

Beneficial outcomes of educational reform can be achieved only if the top-down efforts by the government and the bottom-up efforts by teachers work in concert with each other. Therefore, we, researchers, should bear in mind it is our task to study the new National Curriculum critically, examine its potential, and use it to develop new specific models for classes offered at school.

Note

* The name, “Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT),” has been used since January 2001. The previous name was “Ministry of Education.”

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Addendum

This paper was prepared based on a presentation delivered by the author in Part I session of symposia

titled “Engaging Learners in a New Literacy With the New Japanese National Curriculum (Chairperson : Sachiko Adachi)” held by participants at the International Reading Association 53rd Annual Convention in May, 2008 in Atlanta, Georgia, U.S.A. About 50 educators in the world attended the symposia to discuss global and local issues in the native-language education. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Sachiko Adachi (Niigata University), Akiko Iribe (Tsukuba International University), Kaori Okuizumi (Women’s Junior College of Nippon Sports Science University) and Yuji Fujimori (Shinshu University) who jointly planned and managed the Symposia, as well as those involved in education throughout the world who took part in the discussion.

This work was supported by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research B (19330198).