

# MEXT Guidelines and Revamping Our University EFL Reading Curriculum

Lorraine Reinbold, Harry Harris

## Introduction: MEXT Guidelines

With guidelines revised every ten years, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has announced plans for incremental public school English-education reform from 2014, timing these changes for the 2020 Tokyo Olympics (MEXT, n.d.). These plans include unassessed ALT-directed “fun” foreign-language activities (*gaikokugo katsudo*) from the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years of elementary school and more formal grade-purpose assessed curriculum-based English instruction (*seishiki kamoku*) from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> years. In addition, there will be an increase in public school English-instruction contact hours, and the use of English as the classroom instruction language in lower and upper secondary school English-language curricula, with the instruction focus on speaking, listening, writing, and *reading* (Foreign Languages [English], n.d.). MEXT also advocates a language-education methodology shift from grammar and translation to communication of “ideas and feelings” (MEXT, 2014) and expresses the tentative terminal overall goal of public school graduation of students who can “fluently communicate with English speaking persons” and engage themselves in English-language debates, presentations, and negotiations (MEXT, n.d.).

More relevant to the home university English-education reading curriculum focus of this paper's researchers, many of whose home university English major students plan careers in public school English-language education, MEXT has increased the required number of vocabulary words for public school student acquisition, from 900 to 1200 for junior high school students (MEXT, 2008, p. 6) and from 1300 to 1800 for high school students (MEXT, 2009, p. 9) or a total of 3000 words upon graduation from high school (MEXT, 2016). Our English majors will have to know this vocabulary, and we should help them build upon it so that they, in turn, can teach it more effectively as public school English-language teachers. Also crucial, MEXT has set the bar higher for students who plan to become English teachers, requiring Grade Pre-1 STEP qualifications, TOEFL (iBT) scores of 80 or above, or TOEIC scores of 730 or higher, minimum (MEXT, 2011, p. 12). Since most of these assessments include reading, our students, many of whom plan for Japanese public school teacher certification, will have to have the critical English reading skills to fare well on them, and we will have to design our English Department curricula in general and our reading curriculum in particular to help them.

As well, despite strong criticisms that MEXT expectations are obscure (Tahira, 2012, p. 6), its guidelines ineffective (Hagerman, 2009, p. 12), and its English-education plans improper and defective (Okuno, 2007), MEXT has provided public school four-skill language objectives. Unfortunately, its reading objectives (of relevance here) are not consistently framed as such, lacking, we think, EFL-important clarity, and/or are basic enough to be easily subsumed within our department reading objectives. For example, MEXT instructs that lower secondary school students should "read silently while thinking about the written content, and read aloud, so the meaning of the content is expressed" (MEXT, 2011b). For our purposes,

this mandate does not describe a skill that students should have attained by completion of their academic reading program, distinct from our own course-completion achievement-based reading objectives. (We are aware of the professional support, however, for reading aloud, e.g., Seo, 2014; Huang, 2010.) Because of this, MEXT reading objectives are not an issue for us in this paper.

Nevertheless, MEXT public school English-teacher assessment and vocabulary-increase notifications do seem clear and cannot be disregarded. Our home university English Department, now engaged in a major revision of its ten-year 2007-2017 curriculum, will undoubtedly have to plan with them in mind for our new curriculum, which goes into effect in 2018. In consideration of this revision, this paper thus briefly describes our home university reading program. Based mainly on in-house home university needs and MEXT-provided vocabulary and test requirements, it then offers an evaluation of its itemized three-level reading objectives, as laid out in its home university 2007-2017 *Skill-based Course Descriptions and Objectives* (See Appendix 1).

### **Current Home University Reading Curriculum**

In 2006, in preparation for the new ten-year English program curriculum that would go into effect in 2007, home university English faculty members carefully planned multi-level skill objectives and course curricula for reading, writing, listening, and speaking and in-house published them for home university English-instructor distribution. For the planned three-level reading curriculum, each level a 15-week course meeting 90 minutes a week, vocabulary building and intensive and extensive reading were included, calling for targeted and assessed textbook-centered activities to improve comprehension, critical thinking, and summarizing skills as well

as fluency-building work with graded readers and SRA Reading Laboratory (timed) cards. For a more productive communicative and holistic learning environment, these included pre-reading, reading, and post-reading and multi-skill speaking, listening, and writing tasks. Lastly, activities related to reading-level difficulty were discussed. (Mikulecky, 1998; Nunan, 2000: See for relevant reading-level goalpost discussion.)

Our *Skill-Based Course Descriptions and Objectives* for reading (Appendix 1), the focus of this paper, include the following three aforementioned reading levels, which we index to MEXT trends and home university needs.

### **Reading & Vocabulary Building (Level) 1**

Our 2007-2017 home university Level 1 itemized objectives (*Objective B*) require that students review the 900 English vocabulary items studied in junior high school. Now that MEXT has increased junior high school student required vocabulary to 1200, which is to be available in early spring of 2018, it will be necessary to access, review, and add these to our reading curriculum. This change will be reflected in the course description as well as in the itemized objectives. *Objective C* states that students will learn an additional 100-150 words that we added, mostly TESOL-related vocabulary students need in their cross-program studies, e.g., *peer, idiom, dialect*. This vocabulary will be discussed and possibly revised, as per student needs and cross-curriculum requirements.

MEXT offers no transparent guidance for the remaining itemized objectives, though its references to communication of “ideas and feelings” and engagement in “debates, presentations, and negotiations” (See above.) indicate general across-the-board active reading improvement. Our itemized objectives cover the points of this well, though they may see some tweaks

and one deletion for curriculum-relevance reasons. *Objectives D* and *N* involve extensive reading with graded readers and, in our program, SRA (timed) cards, respectively. With the understanding that meaningful extensive reading may require input of about 500,000 words per year (Nation, 2009, p. 50), we will discuss the number of graded readers students should read and reflect our conclusion in our itemized objectives. *Objective N*, a critical reading skill, will remain as it is.

Finally, *Objective A*, that students meet deadlines, is an important life goal that will be kept. Itemized *Objectives E-M* for this course require that students gain skill in previewing content, guessing from context, scanning, skimming, identifying and outlining main ideas, identifying setting, characters, and significant events, predicting outcomes, summarizing, formulating questions. These critical and measurable objectives will be maintained, with the addition of “paraphrase sentences” to *Objective L*, which will ultimately read “be able to paraphrase sentences and summarize information.” (Both paraphrasing and summarizing are major skills students also work on in our first-year academic-preparation Study Skills course.) *Objective O*, that students will show reading appreciation, will be dropped because it may not be measurable, though we wholeheartedly agree with the intent.

## **Reading & Vocabulary Building (Level) 2**

Our 2007-2017 home university Level 2 itemized objectives (*Objective B*) require that students review the 1300 English vocabulary items studied in senior high school. In accordance with MEXT’s senior high school required-vocabulary increase to 1800, we will access, review, and add these to our reading curriculum and reflect this change in the course description and the itemized objectives. *Objective C* states that students will study an

additional 100-150 teacher-selected vocabulary items. In anticipation of further faculty discussion and decision making, the vocabulary item number and source may change.

As with our 2007-2017 Level 1 itemized objectives, Level 2 *Objective D* requires that students do extensive reading of four or more graded readers. This will not change that students will do extensive reading to increase reading speed (with SRA cards) is subsumed in Level 2 *Objective A*, which requires that successful students meet Level 1 Reading & Vocabulary (itemized) objectives.

Concerning Level 2 *Objectives E-O*, all of these are relevant to our curriculum purposes and to MEXT's discernible guideline spirit. Therefore, they will be retained with the exception of *Objectives K* and *O*, which will be dropped. Again, though we like the intent of these objectives, *K* seems unobservable in MEXT guidelines and, more importantly, esoteric for the purpose of our curriculum, though individual instructors are certainly encouraged to do classwork with these language elements. As well, *O* may not be measurable.

### **Reading & Vocabulary Building (Level) 3**

Our home university Level 3 itemized *Objective A-J* will not change, as they are relevant to our reading program and to our interpretation of MEXT's guideline intent. The number and source of vocabulary items for *Objective B*, however, is still open for discussion. (The 2018 itemized objectives will reflect our conclusions.) More specifically, with students doing English research papers in home university English-language writing courses and Japanese papers in other ones, they will need to work on the skills the objectives reflect. Finally, though we encourage students to read for enjoyment and knowledge without teacher supervision, *Objective K* will

be dropped, as it seems unmeasurable.

## Discussion

When reviewing the *2007-2017 Reading Course Descriptions and Skill-Based Objectives*, our home university English Department objectives seemed quite thorough compared to MEXT's announcements about the public school general need for a four-skill English-education approach, with its shift from grammar and translation to communication of "ideas and feelings" (MEXT, 2014), and about the reading curricula particular necessity of students reading for comprehension and critical thinking. Initially, this lack of relevant guidelines was frustrating for some home university faculty members. Though it is not within the scope of these notes to examine the reasons for MEXT's detail lack, we can but hope that public school English teachers will receive the English-language and communicative-based language-education methodology training that they will certainly need to bring to fruition MEXT's reported white-paper plan.

At any rate, for vocabulary consolidation and building at our private university level, one point of reading-curriculum departure should also be a confirmation that students recognize and can use the 3000 words offered in secondary school. For vocabulary building, as has been suggested elsewhere (Nation, 2009, p. 38), it may also be worth having reference to high-frequency vocabulary lists as well as ones that target the tertiary level, such *The Academic Word List* (See Tatari Reo, n.d.), with encouragement of wide reading and a direct scaffold-instruction methodology. (See Kinsella, 2005, for discussion.)

Students should also read text intensively to build vocabulary and develop strategies that help them become more comfortable with difficult texts (Toshuo, 2005).

In-class and at-home text reading should be attentively done (See Beare, 2017, for sample activity.), with in-class instructor guidance focusing on high-frequency language and strategy-building tasks that can be generalized to other texts, downplaying less common items (Nation, 2009, pp. 26-27), and student at-home reading. As observed below, accountability should be built into intensive reading methodology to ensure that students read homework assignments. Unlike writing classes, for which essays can serve as proof of time spent on task (though there are issues here, too), there is no student-generated reading product on which to focus (Allerson & Grabe, 1986, p. 178), except for results from discussion, other task-related activities, and tests that confirm task completion. Therefore, to ensure that students do their reading assignments, this assignment-completion reading methodology is important.

Students should also read extensively, as with our graded-reader and SRA-card requirements, to build fluency and increase reading speed, since extensive reading leads to both vocabulary knowledge and fluency development (Nation, 2009; Eskey, 1986, as cited in Mikulecky 2008). Additionally, through faster reading, students may distance themselves from English-to-Japanese reading method, or *yakudoku*, a historically-based practice taught from junior high school by which teachers instruct students, with Japanese the language of instruction, to do word-by-word translations from another language into Japanese (Terauchi, 2017), and read in thought units for comprehension. Accountability should also be built into extensive reading objectives, with, for example, graded-reader reports, SRA card-completion record keeping, and tests to confirm task completion.

Above all, students should be continuously assessed to ensure strengthening of their reading abilities and task completion. In our program, these include assignment-based and curriculum-specified



vocabulary and content-focused tests, in-group oral and for-instructor written reports, reading strategy evaluations, progress chart confirmation, and teacher observation to ensure that students are on task. (The last two assessments form part of our students' participation scores.) We are at this point also discussing implementation of teacher-student conferencing (Allerson & Grabe, 1986), to provide students the opportunity to talk about reading assignments and ask questions (which some may be more hesitant to do within the more general classroom framework) as well as to confirm reading assignment completion. However, due to large-class size, time factors, and student speaking-fluency issues, we are questioning productivity. As with the rest of our evolving curriculum, we will discuss and refine, always mindful of student needs.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, MEXT has announced its intent to work towards graduation of students with improved English-language skills from Japanese public schools. Though MEXT is for the most part unclear about university-level responsibilities to achieve this goal, we have evaluated our home university reading curriculum objectives and suggested revision based on our home university needs and on MEXT-provided vocabulary and test requirements.

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## **Appendix 1**

2007 Reading Course Descriptions and Skill-Based Objectives (Revised in 2013)

### **LEVEL 1**

#### **Course Description**

Reading & Vocabulary Building Level 1 is the first in a series of English Reading courses designed to help students learn to become fluent readers by focusing on strategic learning. Students work with various texts doing different activities before, during, and after their reading to develop basic reading comprehension skills. To support English language acquisition, they will increase their vocabulary, learn to recognize the complex nature of reading (readers draw from and interact with textual information), and gain improved reading skills through extensive and intensive reading.

Students will review or be introduced to and practice the following:

- 100 –150 new words and phrases (including TESOL related vocabulary);
- English reading strategies, such as previewing a text to determine the general topic, predicting what will come later, scanning and skimming for general comprehension, guessing mean from context, and answering and formulating questions based on a text; and
- speed reading, using timed and paced readings to increase reading speed and comprehension.

Students who successfully complete the requirements of this course will be able to approach independent vocabulary learning by using a combination of extensive reading and self-study strategies. They should increase their understanding of academic English, improving their ability to read for knowledge, general comprehension, and pleasure, as a result improve their relevant test scores.

#### **Itemized Objectives**

Students successfully completing this course should:

- A. be able to meet deadlines for assignments.
- B. upon review, be able to use with some facility the 900 English vocabulary words introduced in junior high school.
- C. be able to use an additional 100 – 150 new vocabulary words and phrases introduced by the instructor.

- D. read and report on four or more graded readers and complete a number of other assignments based on instructor-provided materials
- E. be able to use information in a title, headline, or subheadings to preview the general content of a text and predict what will follow before reading it.
- F. be able to use a variety of strategies such as guessing from context clues to read and understand English without translating into L1.
- G. be able to scan for pieces of information and locate keywords such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives and identify particular grammatical patterns.
- H. be able to skim for main ideas and points of view.
- I. be able to identify and outline the main ideas of a reading and supporting ideas
- J. be able to identify setting, characters, and major events.
- K. be able to show that they can predict subsequent outcomes from a specific point in a text.
- L. be able to summarize information.
- M. be able to formulate discussion and comprehension questions based on a reading
- N. be able to show an improving ability to increase their reading speed as they learn to cluster, to read in thought groups, rather than word for word.
- O. be able to show some appreciation of reading for knowledge, vocabulary building, and pleasure.

## **LEVEL 2**

### **Course Description**

Reading & Vocabulary Building Level 2 is the second in a series of English Reading courses designed to help students learn to become fluent readers by focusing on strategic learning. Reading & Vocabulary Building Level 1, or its equivalent, is a prerequisite for this course. Students will continue to read various texts by means of pre-reading, during-reading, and post-reading instruction to improve reading comprehension while studying different styles of written English such as formal and informal, and spoken and academic language. To support English language acquisition, they will continue to review and increase their vocabulary, increase reading fluency, learn to critique the contents of a reading and improve reading skills through extensive and intensive reading.

In Reading & Vocabulary Building Level 2, students will review, be introduced to, and practice the following:

- 100–150 new words and phrases (including TESOL related vocabulary);
- pattern identification and paragraph comprehension;
- context guessing and root words, prefixes, and suffixes; and

- linking reading to other skills (writing, speaking, listening)

Students who successfully complete the requirements of this course will continue to approach independent vocabulary learning by using a combination of extensive reading and self-study strategies. They should be better able to read rapidly for comprehension, draw from their vocabulary knowledge, think critically, evaluate information, and show that reading is a way to reinforce their language skills.

## Itemized Objectives

Students successfully completing this course should:

- be able to meet Level 1 Reading and Vocabulary Building objectives.
- upon review, be able to use with some facility the 1300 English vocabulary words introduced in senior high school.
- be able to use an additional 100 – 150 new vocabulary words and phrases introduced by the instructor.
- read and report on four or more graded readers and complete a number of other reading assignments based on instructor–provided materials.
- be able to use headings as guides to the contents of a reading.
- be able to paraphrase the main and supporting ideas of a text with increasing accuracy.
- be able to summarize the main idea and supporting details.
- be able to use information from a reading in discussions and other activities.
- be able to identify differences between written/spoken and formal/informal language
- be able to scan for and explain prefixes/suffixes, synonyms/antonyms, and idioms.
- be able to recognize rhyme and rhythm.
- be able to identify theme/author’s viewpoint and arguments.
- be able to critique the contents of a reading text.
- be able to incorporate words from their readings into their active vocabulary.
- be able to demonstrate increasing comfort with reading English for knowledge, vocabulary building, and pleasure to show that they understand that reading is a way to reinforce their language skills.

## **LEVEL 3**

### **Course Description**

Reading & Vocabulary Building Level 3 is the third in a series of English Reading courses designed to help students learn to become fluent readers by focusing on strategic learning. Reading & Vocabulary Building Levels 1 and 2, or their

equivalents, are prerequisites for this course. To support English acquisition, students will read various content-based English texts as sources for research and other academic purposes while continuing to build their vocabulary, increase their reading fluency, and improve their critical analytical skills and ability to find support for/against a hypothesis.

In Reading & Vocabulary Building Level 3, students will be introduced to and/or practice the following:

- 100 English vocabulary words (including TESOL related vocabulary), grammatical and lexical collocations;
- structure and reference;
- skimming, fluency training to read faster for better textual comprehension; and
- reading aloud to improve pronunciation and listening skills.

Students who successfully complete the requirements of this course should be able to continue to approach independent learning by using skills they have acquired. They should have developed an awareness of the reading process so that they will be able to read authentic English texts for enjoyment, business, research and other academic purposes.

## Itemized Objectives

Students successfully completing this course should:

- A. be able to meet Levels 1 and 2 Reading and Vocabulary Building objectives.
- B. be able to use an additional 1000 English vocabulary words, collocations, and phrases introduced by the instructor.
- C. read and report on four or more graded readers and a variety of teacher-selected content-based readings.
- D. be able to use English text as sources for research and other academic purposes.
- E. be able to identify the five basic patterns of organization in written English: list, sequence, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution to improve comprehension.
- F. be able to take notes from a text.
- G. be increasingly able to make inferences about unstated information.
- H. be to identify irony<sup>1</sup> and bias.
- I. be able to critically analyze and find support for/against a hypothesis.<sup>2</sup>
- J. Be able to apply what they have learned from readings to different activities such as oral reading (reading stories to young children), presentations, debates, and essay writing.
- K. be able to continue to read authentic English articles for enjoyment and



knowledge without teacher supervision and continue to expand their passive and active vocabularies.

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<sup>1</sup> Irony is the presence of an unexpected reality, as in, for example, the final developments in *Romeo and Juliet*.

<sup>2</sup> Hypothesis is an idea which is suggested as a possible explanation for a particular situation or condition but which has not yet been proved to be correct. For example, TPR (Total Physical Response) teaching method assumes that people learn best by using their bodies. Do you believe this to be true?