

# The Course of Study for Senior High School English: Recent Developments, Implementation to Date, and Considerations for Future Research

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## Abstract

The New Course of Study 2009 for Foreign languages: English (*shin gakushuu shidou youryou: gaikokugo, eigo*) will be enacted at the senior high school level from April 2013. The new curriculum further advocates a communicative approach to English language teaching, yet in spite of a succession of previous reforms to the national curriculum, communicative approaches to teaching English have not been widely adopted in Japanese senior high schools. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is threefold: First, I describe and explain key developments in the new curriculum; Next, I provide a review of the most recent empirical research into the implementation of the MEXT's curricular to date, reassessing the role of university entrance examinations and drawing attention to a range of other obstacles operating against reform; Finally, I propose a suitable theoretical framework for researching teacher beliefs and intentions regarding their implementation of the Course of Study 2009.

## 1. Introduction

There is numerous research to indicate that reforms to national curricular are seldom implemented in the classroom as they were intended by their developers. In a variety of English language teaching (ELT) settings, the influential role of teachers, their beliefs, and their teaching context in determining the implementation, or otherwise, of national curricular reform is frequently reported in the literature (e.g., Nunan, 2003, in the Asian-Pacific region; Phipps & Borg, 2009, in Turkey; Silver & Skuja-Steele, 2005, in five international contexts). In Japan, as in many countries, national curriculum innovation has long been a complex process with implementation of policy mandates competing against the influence of contextual and, at times, historical factors (Henrichsen, 1989).

At the centre of Japan's current curricular reforms is the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology's (hereinafter, the MEXT) new Course of Study 2009 (MEXT, 2009), which is to be enacted at the senior high school level from April 2013. Ultimately, the Course of Study 2009 aims to improve the academic level of senior high school education; thereby, enabling more content-based courses to be taught through English at the university level (Yoshida, 2009a). In order to achieve this over-arching goal, the policy makers propose several important changes to the instruction of English at all levels of education. At the senior high school level, reflecting the Asia-Pacific region's general trend towards a communicative approach to language teaching (Nunan, 2003), the Course of Study 2009 further mandates that the teaching of grammatical rules and terminology in English language classes "be minimized" (MEXT, 2009, p. 43). The policy further emphasises that "grammar should be taught in a way to support communication and in a way that it is integrated into language activities" (MEXT, 2009, p.42).

While each of Japan's successive curricular reforms have been intended as levers of change (Pearson, 1988), continuing to promulgate a communicative approach to language teaching, a large body of empirical research indicates that the reforms have not been widely implemented in the classroom (e.g., Gorsuch, 1999; Nishino, 2009, 2012; Yoshida, 2009b; Yoshida, Fujita, Watanabe, Mori, Suzuki, & Osada, 2004; Yoshida, Negishi, Watanabe, Naganuma, & Benesse, 2004). The content of university entrance examinations, which are generally assumed to test reading, is often said to be the cause of misaligned teaching practices that emphasis grammar and translation. However, the

findings from a number of recent studies suggest that the kind of reading required to answer questions in many examinations is now changing (e.g., Guest, 2008; Seki et al., 2011; Underwood, 2010, 2012a). In addition, a complexity of other psychological, social, and context-related factors may also be exerting an influence on the extent to which teachers are able and willing to implement the national curriculum in their classrooms.

As a field of enquiry, however, research into these factors has not been without its limitations. Recognising the influential role that beliefs can have in shaping classroom practices and determining the efficacy of teacher education programmes (Shavelson & Stern, 1981), many studies have sought to investigate the implementation of previous MEXT curriculum through teacher beliefs (e.g., Nishino, 2009, 2012; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Yoshida, Fujita, Watanabe, Mori, Suzuki, & Osada, 2004). Yet despite the psychological nature of much of this work, the research is only beginning to reflect studies conducted in the field of language teacher cognition (i.e., Nishino, 2009, 2012) and has not in any substantial way connected with the field of social psychology (cf. Gorsuch, 2001; Underwood, 2012a, 2012b). Drawing further on these domains would facilitate a more rigorous means of researching the various beliefs teachers have about the factors they consider to facilitate and obstruct their implementation of the new curriculum. Accurate information of this sort could enable teacher educators and school, board of education, and ministry officials, who are serious about putting the new Course of Study guidelines into practice, to more effectively target specific beliefs and factors during the curriculum implementation process (Underwood, 2012a).

The purpose of this current paper, therefore, is threefold: (1) to report on recent developments in the MEXT's new Course of Study 2009 for senior high school English; (2) to provide a current review of the literature, reassessing the role of certain university entrance examinations and drawing attention to a range of factors that have been reported to influence the implementation of the MEXT's curricular to date; and (3) to propose a suitable theoretical framework for researching teacher beliefs and intentions regarding the new curriculum.

## **2. The New Course of Study 2009 for Senior High School English**

### **2.1 The new Course of Study 2009**

All senior high schools in Japan, irrespective of their categorisation, are required to fol-

low the MEXT's Course of Study (*Gakushuu shidou youryou*), which has been the official national curriculum in Japan since 1947. The Course of Study provides the goals, guidelines, and general principles for teaching each subject, and it stipulates the minimum number of credits schools are to provide for each. It is revised approximately every ten years<sup>1</sup> and phased in nationwide, starting at the elementary school level<sup>2</sup> and continuing through to senior high school.

At the centre of the current educational reforms in Japan is the MEXT's New Course of Study for Foreign Languages: English 2009 (*Shin gakushuu shidou youryou: gaikokugo, eigo*, MEXT, 2009), which is the official national curriculum for all senior high schools from April 2013. Further reflecting the communicative emphasis of the previous Course of Study 1999 for senior high school English (MEXT, 2003a) and the Action Plan (MEXT, 2003b), the MEXT states its overall goal for the new curriculum as "To develop students' communication abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., deepening their understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages [English]" (MEXT, 2011, p. 1; official translation). Further articulated in the new curriculum (though not explicitly mentioned) are Cummins' (2000) concepts of conversational and academic language proficiency (Yoshida, 2009). Kensaku Yoshida, a member of the Central Education Committee responsible for creating the Course of Study 2009, describes the new curriculum as "unique in that the basic assumption of the importance of developing 'language ability' underlies all subjects" (Yoshida, 2009b, p. 399). He further states that "for all subjects (not only English), an emphasis must be placed on the development of the ability to write reports, to think, to make judgements and express opinions logically" (p. 391). The assumption underlying the Course of Study 2009, therefore, is that by raising overall academic abilities across all content subjects, the objectives of the English language subjects will be more readily achieved (Yoshida, 2009b). The new subjects, *Basic English Communication*, *English Communication*, *English Expression*, and *English Conversation* and their respective goals are summarised in Table 2.1 below.

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<sup>1</sup> The most recent revisions being 1989, 1999, and 2009

<sup>2</sup> From 2011, English was mandated at the elementary school level in the form of foreign language activities to be conducted in one class a week for Grades 5 and 6. Refer to Hashimoto (2011) for further discussion on this change to the national curriculum.

**Table 2.1**  
**The New Course of Study 2009 for Senior High School English**

Subject	Goals and Key Points <sup>1</sup>	Grade Level <sup>2</sup>	Credits <sup>3</sup>
Basic English Communication	To develop students' basic abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A bridge course between junior and senior high school</li> </ul>	10	2
English Communication	To develop students' basic abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas etc. [and enable them to use such abilities in their social lives], while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Critical thinking through an integration of the four-skills</li> <li>• The integration of grammar with meaning-oriented learning</li> <li>• Developing knowledge of discourse structure through reading and writing</li> </ul>	10 11 12	3 4 4
English Expression 1 and 2	To develop students' abilities to evaluate facts, opinions, etc. from multiple perspectives and communicate through reasoning and a range of expression, while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Productive skills of speaking and writing in authentic social situations</li> <li>• Speeches, presentations, and debates</li> <li>• Writing in genres and with purpose</li> <li>• Phonetic features of speech</li> </ul>	10 11	2 4
English Conversation	To develop students' abilities to hold conversations on everyday topics, while fostering a positive attitude toward communication through the English language. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Conversational strategies</li> <li>• English for overseas travel</li> </ul>	Any	2

*Note.* An asterisk (\*) indicates a required course; square brackets ( [ ] ) indicate an additional goal included in *English Communication 3*.

<sup>1</sup> *Goals* are taken directly from the official translation of the Course of Study 2009 (MEXT, 2011); *Key Points* are indicated by bullet points and represent the author's summarisation.

<sup>2</sup> Courses are to be taught at this grade level in principle.

<sup>3</sup> The total number of credits is 21

Developing upon the Course of Study 1999 (MEXT, 2003a), the Course of Study 2009 expands the range of “Language-Use Situations” such as an exchange of letters and emails, and “Language Functions” such as transmitting information (e.g., explaining and reporting) (MEXT, 2011, pp. 5-6; official translation). The curriculum also specifies grammatical items and vocabulary which it suggests are to be incorporated with language-use situations and language functions (pp. 6-7). As with the Course of Study 1999, in the instruction of each subject, teachers are required to “devise teaching methods and styles, incorporating pair work, group work, etc., as appropriate” (p. 7).

## **2.2 The restructuring of the new Course of Study 2009**

Yoshida (2009b) states that under the Course of Study 2009 while English has been introduced in elementary schools, the overall objectives and goals of junior and senior high school English have remained the same. Elementary school education aims to develop the foundations upon which further knowledge of English can be built and provide opportunities for basic communication in English. At the junior high school level the emphasis is on further developing basic conversational skills (cf. Cummins', 2000, notion of conversational proficiency) and the ability to understand various types of information. At the senior high school level, the focus is on developing academic proficiency (cf. Cummins', 2000, academic language proficiency), such as expressing oneself in English in presentations, debate, and discussions. At the senior high school level, the most apparent developments have been in the restructuring of the English curriculum and the MEXT's recommendations for teaching it, which aim to encourage Japanese teachers to focus more on English as a means communication. Under the Course of Study 2009, the four-skill class *English Communication 1*, which is taught mainly by Japanese teachers, is the only required subject. As there is no longer a compulsory subject for oral communication (i.e., *Oral Communication 1* under the Course of Study 1999), the curriculum aims to persuade Japanese teachers, who Yoshida (2009) describes as previously treating the four-skill subjects “as if they were meant for grammar-translation instruction” (p. 393), to provide more opportunities for students to experience English as a means of communication in the compulsory *English Communication 1* class. Nevertheless, despite objections from curriculum advisors, *English Conversation* has remained in the Course of Study 2009 as an optional subject, which Yoshida (2009) expects will allow Japanese teachers to continue relegating the teaching of the commu-

nicative aspects of language to this class (normally taught by foreign assistant language teachers) and continue using the four-skill *English Communication* class to focus on grammar and translation.

### 2.3 Grammar teaching and the new Course of Study 2009

The emergence of communicative language teaching in the late 1970s prompted intense research on the role of grammar in the learner-centred curriculum. Although early communicative approaches emphasised exclusive attention to meaning, early on in this period Brumfit (1980) recognised the complementary role of grammar and communicative work. Some 30 years on, while numerous areas in teaching grammar remain unresolved (e.g., Sheen & O'Neill, 2005), it is now generally acknowledged that explicit attention to grammar, though not affecting the sequence of acquisition, is clearly beneficial to its rate of learning and should not be ignored (Ellis, 2001; Hossein & Fotos, 2011; Norris & Ortega, 2000).

In line with this general orientation in ELT, the MEXT's Course of Study 2009 provides numerous references regarding how grammar should be treated in English classes, stating, for instance, that "grammar should be taught in a way to support communication and in a way that it is integrated into language activities" (MEXT, 2009, p.42). Table 2.2 presents the key extracts related to the teaching of grammar under the Course of Study 2009.

**Table 2.2**  
**Grammar-related Extracts from the New Course of Study 2009**

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1. As *English Communication I* is a mandate for all students, it [the Central Education Council] has also reached a decision to include all the topics stated in Grammar in *English Communication I*. (p. 38).
  2. Grammar should be taught in a way to support communication, and in a way that it is integrated into language activities. (p. 42).
  3. Grammar is needed as a basic foundation for communication; therefore it is important not to separate these two elements. (p. 43).
  4. In teaching grammar, explaining technical terms and usage should be minimized. Instead, it is important to instruct students in a way that they can utilize their grammatical knowledge in communication. In conducting language activities such as reading and listening, different varieties of materials that include new grammatical expressions can actually put that grammar in a real context for the students, which makes it easier for them to relate to these new expressions. Encouraging them to actually make a use out of new grammatical expressions in speaking and writing also helps them to be more familiar with the topics they are learn-

ing. (p. 43).

5. When teaching phrases, sentence structures, and grammar, which are needed for communication, do not let the explanations of each term and usage be the dominant part of the teaching. (p. 43).
6. As for every English course, if a lesson places a disproportionate emphasis on teaching grammar, it needs to be adjusted to make a lesson more language-activity based in order to provide students with an environment where they can practice communication. (pp. 43-44).

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*Note.* Extracts taken from an unofficial translation.

As can be seen from Table 2.2, the Course of Study 2009 explicitly mandates that the teaching of grammatical rules and terminology in English language classes “should be minimized” (Extract 4; MEXT, 2009, p. 43). In this respect, MEXT aims to address what the research (Yoshida, Fujita, Watanabe, Mori, Suzuki, & Osada, 2004; Yoshida, Negishi, Watanabe, Naganuma, & Benesse, 2004) indicates to be an overemphasis on grammar-translation instruction in senior high school English classes. Yet, as with the previous Course of Study 1999 (MEXT, 2003a) curriculum and the Action Plan (MEXT, 2003b), the Course of Study 2009 stops short of providing any specific guidance or referring to any methodological framework for integrating grammar with communicative work (e.g., Dougherty & Williams, 1998; Eisenstein, 1987; Ellis, 2006; Johnson, 1982). This lack of explicit methodological guidance from the MEXT, coupled with the contextual factors I discuss in my review of the empirical research below, is likely to be a significant impediment to the latest attempts at reform.

### **3. The ‘Subjective Reality’ of Curricular Implementation**

In mainstream education, Fullan (2007) illustrated the tension between the ‘objective reality’ of policy rhetoric and the “subjective reality” facing teachers in their day-to-day working contexts as they deal with numerous factors that can impede their implementation of national curriculum mandates (p. 23). Factors such as difficult classroom conditions, the absence of training, an unsupportive school environment, and insufficient resources have all been reported to obstruct curricular reform reaching the classroom. Successive reforms to the Course of Study continue to promulgate a communicative approach to language teaching. Yet, to date, as the following review of empirical research will demonstrate, reforms to the previous curricular have not been widely reflected in classroom practice. The research suggests numerous factors influencing teachers’ imple-



mentation of the national curriculum in Japan. The first of these factors is the alleged washback effect from university entrance examinations. In addition, a variety of other factors are evident in the empirical research. In this paper I will focus on five, which may be broadly categorised as follows: (1) problematic classroom conditions; (2) difficulties with teacher training; (3) numerous extra-curricular duties; (4) problems using the MEXT's textbooks; and (5) social pressure. In the following section I discuss each of these factors.

### 3.1 The influence of university entrance examinations

In spite of the communicative emphasis of the MEXT's Courses of Study, the predominant method of instruction in Japanese senior high school English classes to date is widely acknowledged to be *yakudoku*, literally meaning *translation through reading* (e.g., Gorsuch, 1999; Mulvey, 1999; Silver & Skuja-Steele, 2005; Watanabe, 1997; Yoshida, Negishi, Watanabe, Naganuma, & Benesse, 2004). One reason teachers frequently cite in justifying the *yakudoku* method is a requirement to prepare students for university entrance examinations that emphasise reading, for which, they assert, *yakudoku* is the most effective preparation (e.g., Gorsuch, 2000; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Silver & Skuja-Steele, 2005; Yoshida & Naganuma, 2003; Yoshida, Negishi, Watanabe, Naganuma, & Benesse, 2004). Though reading is widely assumed to predominate in the English language university entrance examinations, to date there have been no empirical studies that have analysed a representative sample of what is certainly in excess of 1000 second-stage university entrance examinations<sup>3</sup> administered yearly across Japan. Collectively, however, the findings from a number of studies are now beginning to call into question the validity of the assertion that *yakudoku* is the most effective form of preparation for the kind of reading required by some of the most recent examinations (Brown & Yamashita, 1995; Guest, 2000, 2008; Kikuchi, 2006; Mulvey, 1999; Seki et al., 2011; Underwood, 2010, 2012a; Watanabe, 1997).

The first two studies I will highlight in this review are Brown and Yamashita (1995) and Kikuchi (2006). In one of the earliest and widely cited studies on university

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<sup>3</sup> For the majority of students the standard university admissions procedure has two main stages: The National Center Test, which is administered over two days in January; and one or two second-stage examinations (referred to as *niji shiken* in Japanese), which individual institutions administer twice (i.e., two versions referred to as *zenki* and *kouki* in Japanese) in February through March.

entrance examinations, Brown and Yamashita (1995) analysed the 1993 National Center Test and a purposive sample of second-stage examinations (also administered in 1993) from 20 of Japan's top public ( $n=10$ ) and private ( $n=10$ ) universities. In summary, Brown and Yamashita found that almost all examinations emphasised the receptive skill of reading and tested this through multiple-choice items. They noted that overall many of the questions were based on all or part of two to three lengthy reading passages containing "relatively high level language, almost surely above the level of the simplified texts that are often used for pedagogical purposes" (p. 27), with the second-stage examinations being far more difficult than the National Center Test. On average public university examinations contained approximately 26% translation items (predominantly English to Japanese) and in four of the public institutions a third or more of their examination focused on translation. On the other hand, private university examinations contained approximately 9% translation items with seven of the examinations containing little or no translation at all. There was no translation on the National Center Test.

Kikuchi (2006) replicated this study to investigate whether there had been any changes in the examinations from these universities between 1994 and 2004. He concluded that while some second-stage examinations now incorporated more summarising items for reading or listening passages, overall there was little fundamental change in the content of examinations. Most of the examinations continued to test the receptive skill of reading through multiple-choice items and the reading indices (Flesch Reading Ease, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Levels, and Fog Count<sup>4</sup>) had essentially remained the same. Regarding translation items, overall there were no noticeable changes in the average percentage of items; however, fewer private university examinations were emphasising translation. In addition, two of the top public institutions (Tokyo University and Tokyo University of Foreign Studies) had begun to require the translation of English summaries into Japanese, and vice versa. In relation to the National Center Test, Kikuchi did not report any significant changes in test content between 1994 and 2004.

In short, the findings of Brown and Yamashita (1995) and Kikuchi (2006) suggest that the yakudoku method approach to preparing students may be effective preparation for answering some of the translation items for some examinations. However, considering

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<sup>4</sup> Reading indices have been used to estimate the difficulty of a text in terms of word and sentence complexity and the approximate number of years of formal education required to understand the text.

also the increasing number of private university examinations not emphasising translation and the amount of reading and level of difficulty in other parts of the tests, the data may well suggest that alternative pedagogies are equally justified. In the next study I will focus on here, which represents the most recent work on second-stage examinations, Seki et al. (2011) arrive at similar conclusions.

Expanding the research into second-stage university entrance examinations, Seki et al. (2011) investigated whether a grammar-translation approach would be an appropriate method of preparation. Seki et al. analysed a purposive sample of 91 second-stage examinations administered during 2008 and 2009 at 33 universities (national<sup>5</sup>,  $n=9$  and private,  $n=24$ ) across Japan. Their analysis focused on the time of the test and the length of text; the amount and type of questions (e.g., various forms of translation, grammar, summarising, listening comprehension, and creative writing), the question format (e.g., multiple-choice response), reading indices (as measured by Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Levels), the text type, and whether test items were classified as A-Type (e.g., those requiring narrow reading, Japanese to English translation, True/False answers to short questions, and discrete-point grammar questions); B-Type (e.g., those requiring substantial reading fluency, judgement, cognitive skill, or productive use of language in answering); or O-Type (i.e., those not conforming to either A- or B-Type categories). In summary of the key findings, the data indicate that A-Type items, items which were defined as compatible with a grammar-translation approach to teaching, represented only 40.4% of the total number of test items. Almost 90% of these required only local level reading (i.e., comprehension at the word or single-sentence level) to answer the question correctly. The same was true of more than 50% of the O-Type items, which represented 42.4% of the total items. On the other hand, B-Type questions represented 17.2% of the items, 80% of which required broader reading and the synthesis of information from across the substantial lengths of text. Seki et al. stressed that while B-Type questions represented a lower proportion of the overall test items, they were often associated with long reading passages that carried a higher share of the test's marks. They concluded that grammar-translation methodology would be inadequate in preparing students for the type of reading skills and communicative tasks

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<sup>5</sup> In national institutions a single entrance examination is administered to all students irrespective of the departments they intend to enter. The examinations from private institutions came from either humanity or science departments, or both.

now contained in many of the examinations in their sample. Moreover, since all three item question types (i.e., A, B, and O) were present across many of the examinations, it would not be effective for teachers to adopt grammar-translation as their only method of preparation.

The final two studies I will present in this review are Guest (2008) and Underwood (2010), which are both concerned with the National Center Test. Guest (2008) conducted a comparative analysis of the 1981 and 2006 versions of the National Center Test. His analysis focused on task type, task difficulty, topic/genre, and the skills required. In summarising the key findings, Guest observed that the first, and perhaps most significant, difference between the two tests was the addition of a listening component to the 2006 version. The second major change relates to the number and length of reading passages, which Guest observes as increasing from one passage of 200 words in the 1981 version of the test to four passages in the 2006 version (three of which were around 500 words each). Guest also observes that in the 1981 test, discrete-point items accounted for 42% of the total marks, and these required only local level reading comprehension. In contrast, in the 2006 test only 25% of the total marks was accounted for by discrete-point items, whereas 75% of the marks were associated with integrative items that required global reading and a range of reading and listening skills such as, summarizing, extrapolating, interpreting, sequencing, and paraphrasing. Guest concludes that the 2006 version of the National Center Test was clearly a more superior test, which measured a variety of cognitive abilities and language skills through a wider range of topics and tasks.

Further expanding the research into the content of university entrance examinations, my own work (Underwood, 2010) compared the comprehension questions and reading passages from a sample of Grade 12 *Reading* course textbooks with those contained in the long essay reading, Section 6, of the 2003 to 2009 versions of the National Center Test (*hikkishiken: dai 6 mon, choubun dokkai*). The findings indicated that reading ease indices and grade levels of the passages in the 2008 and 2009 versions of the test were significantly more difficult and advanced than both the earlier 2003 to 2007 versions of the test and the textbooks and above many of those of the top-tier second-stage university entrance examinations analysed in Kikuchi's (2006) study. Regarding the lexical complexity of the passages, there was a significant level of high frequency vocabulary in all versions of the National Center Test as well as the textbooks, which was in sharp

contrast to earlier analyses of the MEXT's textbooks, which reported a clear absence of high frequency vocabulary (Browne, 1998). Finally, whereas the comprehension tasks in the 2003 to 2007 versions of the test required only local level comprehension, the 2008 and 2009 tests involved the simultaneous use of a number of reading skills, such as recognizing synonymy, extracting details from the main ideas, drawing inferences, and synthesizing information from across the entire passage.

In summing up this section on university entrance examinations and their influence on senior high school pedagogy, the findings from the empirical studies presented here indicate that some examinations are indeed changing. In terms of the National Center Test, besides the obvious inclusion of a listening component in 2006, Guest (2008) and my own research (Underwood, 2010) clearly illustrates ways in which the test has developed. Regarding the second-stage examinations, while there has been no research into a representative sample, the recent work by Seki et al. (2011) appears to further support the notion that many prestigious institutions are beginning to emphasise a variety of abilities and language skills in their examinations. Indeed, while the testing of reading clearly predominates in the tests described here, what is clear from the most recent research findings is that neither *yakudoku* nor grammar-translation methodology would be sufficient in preparing students for the kind of reading now encountered on many examinations. Taken together the findings from these studies add weight to Mulvey's (1999) claim, made more than a decade ago, that "there seemed to be little direct evidence of a causal relationship between entrance exam content and...the teaching of reading skills" (p.128), and that "the influence of the various university exams on junior and senior high school foreign language pedagogy in Japan has been exaggerated" (p.125). No doubt teachers in academic schools are influenced by the requirement to prepare students for university entrance examinations; however, as Underwood's (2012a) study revealed, while teachers may report examinations as influential, few are actually aware of their recent content and the constructs they examine. In addition to the common reference to examinations, then, a clearer understanding of the influence exerted by a complexity of other "social, psychological and environmental" factors (Borg, 2006, p. 40) is required, and it is to these factors which my attention now turns.

### **3.2 Other factors influencing implementation of the Courses of Study**

Based on the evidence cited above, it is becoming increasingly difficult to explain the

misalignment of teaching practices and the MEXT curriculum by reference to washback from either the National Center Test or second-stage examinations. A variety of additional factors has been suggested to influence teaching practices and in the following section I will focus on five of these.

The first of these factors is related to the classroom context of teaching. In Japan, three aspects of classroom conditions have featured prominently in the literature: student expectations and participation (Kurihara, 2008; Nishino, 2009, 2012; Sakui, 2007; Taguchi, 2002), difficulty in managing large class sizes (Gorsuch, 2000, 2001; Nishino, 2009; O'Donnell, 2005; Sakui, 2007; Taguchi, 2002), and issues with student control (Gorsuch, 2000, 2001; Nishino, 2009; Sakui, 2007). Gorsuch (1999) concluded from her national survey of 876 teachers in both academic and vocational senior high schools<sup>6</sup> that even if examinations were to incorporate more communicative components, teachers would be less likely to adopt communicative language teaching (CLT) practices due to their concerns about controlling large class sizes. Similarly, Nishino's (2009, 2012) mixed-methods study of academic and vocational senior high school teachers, which incorporated a questionnaire survey (N=139), interviews, and observations, found that almost a third of the teachers who wanted to adopt more communicative practices stated that smaller classes were necessary. In the case-study research, a number of studies have further supported these findings (e.g., Sakui, 2007; Taguchi, 2002). However, one further study I would like to draw attention to is Kurihara's (2008) research into her students' attitudes towards participation in CLT activities. Collecting data from 38 Grade 11 students studying at an academic senior high school and through a pre- and post-study questionnaire survey, student and teacher journals, and interviews, Kurihara found that about two thirds of the students reported that speaking out in front of the whole class was "extremely difficult", and in practice only 10% actually did so (p. 7). However, for the majority of her students working in groups according to student preferences appeared to reduce anxiety and increase their motivation to participate in CLT activities.

A second suggested factor often reported to obstruct the MEXT's attempts at reform concerns teacher training. Under the Action Plan, a five-year initiative aimed to provide

<sup>6</sup> Academic and vocational senior high schools are comprised of public (national or local) and private institutions. Broadly speaking, academic institutions are focused on preparing students for entrance to four-year universities; whereas, vocational schools aim to prepare students for the workplace or three-year vocational colleges.

ten days of in-service training in Japan in which all public junior and senior high school teachers would participate and for 400 teachers (in 2003) between two and 12 months' training overseas. However, the outcome of these initiatives has received mixed criticism (e.g., Shimamura, 2009). Interview data from Yamada's (2005) case study of five junior and senior high school teachers who were training in Japan indicated that "the coercive nature of the program was not viewed favourably by the participants...needs were not always met by the program [and] there was less change in the participants' teaching practices than the program had aimed for" (pp. 85-6). Kurihara's (2012) survey of the beliefs of 23 junior and 43 senior high school teachers (N=66) found that in relation to their training overseas approximately 84% of teachers had positive attitudes towards learning about CLT approaches, and upon returning to Japan around 86% of teachers reported incorporating some aspects of CLT in their classrooms. However, approximately a third of teachers who had studied overseas reported that they "found themselves torn between settings which emphasize different values, expectations, goals, and practices" and what Kurihara suggested were the demands of their local teaching contexts and their beliefs about language teaching (p. 57).

While not as prevalent in the Japanese empirical literature, some studies (Cook, 2009, 2010; O'Donnell, 2005; Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004; Underwood, 2012a, 2012b) have highlighted a third factor, which concerns extra-curricular responsibilities. Sato and Kleinsasser's (2004) case study (cited above) indicated that teaching to the test would appear far easier for teachers than adopting CLT practices, citing the comments of one teacher who reported that administrative work and simply "getting through the day" (p. 811) can take precedence over teaching practices, and developing communicative lessons simply consumes too much "time, energy, and will power" (p. 807). Similarly, in O'Donnell's (2005) ethnographic study of three senior and two junior high school teachers, many of the teachers were unable to teach in the way they wanted due to numerous extra-curricular responsibilities, which accounted for far more than half of their workload and in the case of one teacher more than two thirds. Underwood's (2012a), mixed-methods study of 16 teachers working in three public and private academic senior high schools, gathered data through a qualitative survey, focus groups, and a semi-structured interview. One of the main factors teachers reported as a potential influence on their implementing the Course of Study 2009 concerned a lack of time. In the surveys, most teachers ( $n=8$ ) expressed strong concerns over their lack of time to prepare lessons

according to the Course of Study guidelines. One reason for this was offered in the novice-teacher focus group in which teachers reported that on top of their 18 to 20 classes per week, serious impediments to the reform would be their heavy administrative and extra-curricular duties. These were significant and included, for instance, substantial paperwork and reports, parent consultations, club activities, weekend and evening school events, and contests, about which the department head commented, “That’s why we stay 13 hours a day” (p. 918).

A fourth kind of impediment concerns the difficulties teachers encounter using the MEXT’s required textbooks to integrate grammar teaching with communicative activities as mandated by the Courses of Study and the Action Plan (MEXT, 2003b). In Sato and Kleinsasser’s (2004) study, a novice teacher working in an academic private senior high school confessed a reluctant adoption of *yakudoku* because of difficulties using the textbook communicatively: “I have no idea about how to deal with the textbook. Eventually, I ended up with the *yakudoku* (grammar translation) method. I just couldn’t help it. I am depressed with self-hate. I still don’t know how to teach English” (p. 808). These findings are further echoed in Underwood’s (2012b) report on the preliminary stage research of a mixed-methods, multiple case study into teacher beliefs about the Course of Study 2009. One teacher working in an academic private school expressed concern that the current textbooks would be too inadequate, stating that for teachers to be able to implement the new curriculum effectively, better textbooks would be required, “otherwise the new approach would create a lot of confusion among teachers” (p. 13). These comments further reinforce the point made by Goh et al. (2005) in relation to the implementation of the national curriculum in Singapore. Goh et al. stressed that given many teachers’ reliance on the textbook for guidance and direction, and therefore its key role in helping teachers assimilate national curriculum guidelines, the provision of quality textbooks is of paramount importance.

A fifth and final factor reported for teachers’ reluctance to adopt the Course of Study approach is the social pressure they experience from colleagues. While there might be objections to such characterisations (e.g., Kubota, 1999), in “collectivist cultures” such as Japan (Rogers, 2003, pp. 178-179), it is not unsurprising that senior colleagues can exert considerable pressure on junior teachers to conform to institutional norms. For instance, the findings of Yoshida, Negishi, Watanabe, Naganuma, and Benesse’s (2004) national questionnaire survey indicated that Japanese teachers were less inclined to



adopt the MEXT's policy in contexts where the social culture of the school was unsupportive of its recommended approach. Similarly, Sato and Kleinsasser (2004) found that peer planning and peer observation in one school context served mainly to reinforce current practices rather than challenge them, suggesting that maintaining a social status quo was of greater concern than objective evaluation and policy implementation. The influence of seniority was also highlighted in Underwood's (2012a) study, in which novice teachers at an academic private senior high school reported senior colleagues to exert a significant pressure to conform to standard teaching practices, namely *yakudoku*. Although one of the teachers reported spending only five to ten minutes on grammar and translation in the Course of Study 1999 *English 1* and *English 2* four-skill courses, she also revealed that her teaching style was beginning to cause friction with senior colleagues. Consequently, in spite of being eager to join the English Department and apply her TESOL training, she had become increasingly despondent and was beginning to question the efficacy of the MEXT's approach. The department head suggested that while younger teachers might have greater hopes for teaching according to the Course of Study, senior teachers over 45 years of age would be more resistant, "From my experience, some of them—not all of them—have a very strong belief in the way that they have been taught and they don't want to change" (p. 918).

In summary, in addition to the content of certain university entrance examinations, the preceding review has highlighted a range of factors that have been reported to obstruct the implementation of national curriculum to date. These are classroom conditions, teacher training, extra-curricular responsibilities, MEXT textbooks, and social pressure to adopt *yakudoku* methodology. Many of the factors related to teachers and their practice have been investigated through their beliefs about the MEXT's curriculum and the communicative approach to teaching it represents. However, as I indicated in the introduction to this paper, despite the psychological nature of much of this work, in the Japanese context thus far, the research is only beginning to connect with the field of language teacher cognition (i.e., Nishino, 2009, 2012) and has not, as yet, in any substantial way drawn from the field of social psychology (cf. Gorsuch, 2001; Underwood, 2012a, 2012b).

Given the complexity involved in this kind of research, one way of increasing its validity and reliability, and as such the confidence in its findings, is through the adoption of an appropriate theoretical framework to guide the operationalization of constructs,

data collection and analysis, and the accurate interpretation of findings. My assertion is that accurate information about what teachers believe to be the factors affecting their adoption of the Course of Study 2009 is likely to be directly useful in establishing the conditions in which the curriculum may be more readily implemented. Firstly, such information may be used to identify existing beliefs that require change or promote the formation of new beliefs, which in turn may lead toward the development of stronger intentions to adopt the new Course of Study recommendations. Secondly, accurate information about what teachers' believe to hinder their adoption of the curriculum may be used to inform and encourage school and ministry officials to establish the necessary conditions (e.g., training, resources, and time) under which teachers with the intentions to implement the curriculum may in fact be able to do so. In the remainder of this paper, I present the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2005) as a suitable framework for conducting such research and explain how it conceptualises the relationship between beliefs, intentions, and behaviour.

#### **4. The Theory of Planned Behaviour**

Ajzen's (1985, 1991, 2005) Theory of Planned Behaviour (hereinafter, TPB) was designed to predict and explain human behaviour and to provide a framework for devising behavioural change interventions (Ajzen, 1991). It has been shown to be a robust model for predicting human behaviour in several meta-analyses (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001) and applied in a wide range of fields such as, social, organisational, and behavioural psychology, health and social welfare, marketing and consumer behaviour, and education (Ajzen, 2012, provides an online bibliography of more than 900 published empirical studies). In general education, researchers have used the TPB to guide numerous investigations in a variety of areas. These include for example, science education reforms (Haney, Czerniak, & Lumpe, 1996; USA), mathematics education reforms (Oh, 2001; Korea), and engagement with information communication technologies (Siragusa & Dixson, 2009; Australia). In ELT contexts, far fewer studies have adopted the TPB (i.e., Gorsuch, 2001; Kennedy, 1996; Kennedy & Kennedy, 1996; Keranen, 2008; Huang, J., 2005; Huang, L., 2009; Lin & Chiou, 2010; Underwood, 2012a, 2012b; Wallestad, 2009).

#### 4.1 How the Theory of Planned Behaviour works

The TPB has demonstrated through a substantial body of empirical research that barring unforeseen circumstances volitional human behaviour<sup>7</sup> is directly preceded by the intention to engage in that behaviour. This relationship is represented diagrammatically in Figure 4.1.

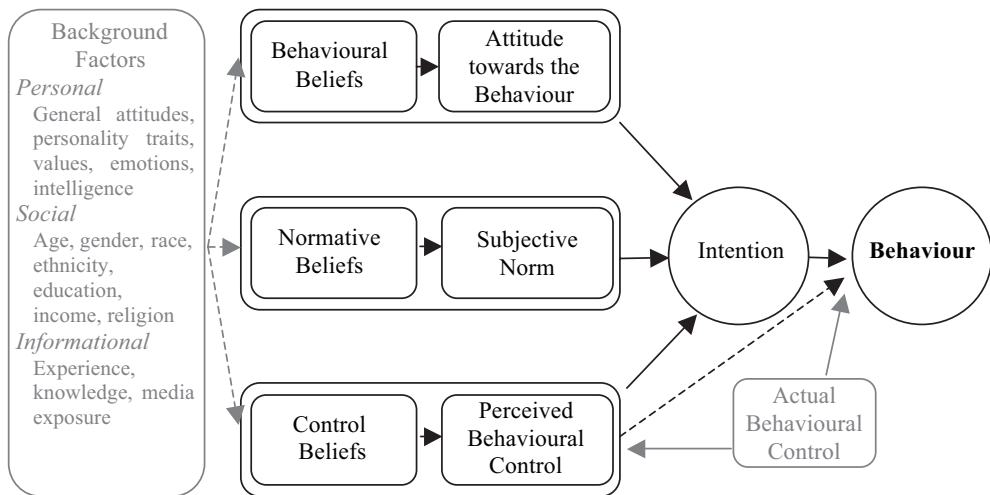


Figure 4.1. A schematic representation of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (adapted from Ajzen, 2005, p. 135).

The concept of behavioural intention captures a range of motivational factors (Ajzen, 1991), indicating both the degree of effort people are willing to exert in order to perform a behaviour and the likelihood of their performing that behaviour. As a general rule, the TPB posits that people with strong intentions to adopt a behaviour are more likely to engage in that behaviour (Ajzen, 2005).

According to the TPB, intentions follow from, and can be understood by, the interrelationship between three main antecedents: (1) *behavioural beliefs and attitudes towards the behaviour*; (2) *normative beliefs and subjective norms*; and (3) *control beliefs and perceived behavioural control*. (I discuss each of these below.) In the TPB the general construct of belief is defined as “the subjective probability that the object has the attribute in question” (p. 30). *Object* refers to “a person, institution, policy or event” (Ajzen,

<sup>7</sup> Volitional behaviour refers to whether a person can decide at will to perform, or otherwise, the behaviour.

2005, p. 6), and *attribute* refers to “other objects, characteristics, or events” (p. 29). Ajzen (2005) states that people can hold numerous and various beliefs about an object, and these are formed through “direct observation”, “inference processes”, or “indirectly by accepting information” from outside sources (p. 30). In the context of this current discussion, the object is *a new Course of Study 2009 approach to grammar teaching* and a behavioural attribute, for example, might be *is effective in developing communicative ability*.

Figure 4.1 illustrates how a number of background factors may in turn influence or inform these three beliefs areas. While the TPB acknowledges the potential importance of background factors in providing a deeper understanding of the underlying foundations of beliefs and by extension behaviour, Ajzen (2005) explains that the influence of these factors on behaviour is mediated for the most part by beliefs and their respective attributes. In Figure 4.1, the indirect relationship between background factors and behaviour is denoted by the dotted line linking background factors to beliefs.

#### **4.2 The Theory of Planned Behaviour belief areas and their respective attributes**

The first kind of belief in the TPB, behavioural beliefs, is personal in nature and is formed through associating performance of a specific behaviour with certain outcomes, or attributes. The *attitude towards the behaviour* is determined by the person’s evaluation of those outcomes. In the field of social psychology attitudes are generally considered as “the learned, relatively stable tendency to respond to people, concepts, and events in an evaluative way” (Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2002, A-35). Empirical research has shown that such evaluations often contain two components (Ajzen, 2006), namely, experiential (e.g., pleasant, enjoyable, and fun) and/or instrumental (e.g., useful, worthless, and valuable). To illustrate behavioural beliefs and attitudes towards the behaviour in the context of this current study, an English teacher might believe that a reform-oriented approach to integrating grammar teaching with communicative work (the behaviour) would reduce time available to prepare for university entrance examinations (the outcome, or attribute), which the teacher considers to be a disadvantage of the approach (an unfavourable, instrumental evaluation of the behaviour).

The second kind of belief, *normative beliefs*, reflects a social influence and arises from a person’s perception that influential others would approve or disapprove of their

adopting the behaviour, or that those people themselves would engage, or otherwise, in its adoption. The *subjective norm* represents the person's motivation to comply with this subjective perception of social pressure. Looking at normative beliefs and subjective norms in the context of this current research, an English teacher might have many favourable attitudes towards a reform-oriented approach, but she may also think her students or senior colleagues, whose opinions she values highly, would strongly disapprove of her adopting it. In this case, the teacher's personal beliefs regarding the efficacy of the approach could be subordinate to the social pressure she perceives to reject it and her motivation to comply with this pressure.

The third kind of belief, *control beliefs*, deals with the presence or absence of factors that would facilitate or inhibit adoption of the behaviour. The addition of control beliefs distinguishes the TPB from the earlier Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975) that dealt exclusively with behavioural and normative beliefs. *Perceived behavioural control* represents the degree to which a person perceives themselves to have control over the required skills and resources to adopt the behaviour. Ajzen (2005) states that in many cases, performance of a behaviour is dependent not only on intentions but also some degree of actual control over the behaviour. When intentions are not mediated by attitudes and subjective norms, to the extent that the person's perception of control is realistic it can serve as a proxy for actual control, and thus contribute towards the prediction of behaviour directly. The broken arrow that is in proximity to *Actual Behavioural Control* in Figure 4.1 indicates this relation. Considering control beliefs and perceived behavioural control in the context of the current study, an English teacher might believe that a reform-oriented approach requires knowledge of activities that integrate the target grammar with communication (i.e., a facilitating control factor). However, he may not have sufficient knowledge of these activities and consequently feel a lack of confidence in his ability to implement the COS 2009 approach (i.e., a low perception of control over performing the behaviour).

### **4.3 The rationale for adopting the Theory of Planned Behaviour**

The TPB is applicable to this context of study for two main reasons. First, the model's behavioural, normative, and control beliefs correspond with the various personal, social, and context-related factors that the review of the literature has suggested to be influential on curriculum implementation in the Japanese context to date. This point is

reinforced by Waters (2009), who stated that by accounting for the numerous complexities associated with implementing ELT curricular, the TPB “helps to throw light on why innovations which do not appear to show awareness of it typically experience difficulties” (p. 443). Second, the TPB has been shown through several meta-analyses (e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2001) to be a robust model for explaining and predicting human behaviour (Eccles, Grimshaw, & Kaner, 2004). This is particularly pertinent to the current context of discussion as teachers may not demonstrate reform-oriented teaching practices immediately upon enactment of the policy in April 2013<sup>8</sup>. Impact studies are often retrospective in their approach; however, the TPB provides a theoretically rigorous means of anticipating, rather than reporting subsequently on, the impact of the new curriculum. From this perspective, as I discussed at the end of Section 3, such research can offer insights into the immediate challenges teachers foresee and how teachers might be better supported.

## 5. Conclusion

I began this paper by explaining in some detail the expectations of the Course of Study 2009 for senior high school English. Regarding the implementation of MEXT’s policies to date, the empirical literature has illustrated a clear tension between what the MEXT’s policies require and the subjective teaching reality in senior high schools. One major influence is the university entrance examinations, which tend to emphasise reading. Yet, while reading still clearly predominates in many of the examinations analysed in the studies presented here, what is clear from the most recent research findings is that neither *yakudoku* nor grammar-translation methodology would be sufficient preparation for the kind of reading students would now encounter on many examinations, even those of top-tier institutions. In addition to the examinations, I also drew attention to a complexity of other factors, which Borg (2006) refers to as “social, psychological and environmental” (p. 40) and also appear to have exerted a strong influence on teachers’ implementation to date. However, in spite of the psychological nature of much of this work, I argued that few studies have adopted a suitable framework to guide their research or provided clear operational definitions of the constructs under study. To this end, I proposed the

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<sup>8</sup> Note Innovation Theory’s adopter categories (Rogers, 2003, p. 279), which describe how individuals in a social system may adopt an innovation at earlier or later stages.

application of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1985, 1991, 2005) as an appropriate theoretical and analytical framework for investigating the complex nature of, and interaction between, Japanese ELF teacher beliefs and intentions. I suggest it could be one effective means by which the impact of Japan's Course of Study 2009 may be better anticipated.

While changing teachers' beliefs is not a straightforward process, and establishing the necessary conditions equally so, by identifying specific beliefs that are most likely to influence a teachers' behaviour, appropriate remedial intervention programmes (either at a local or national level) can be designed to encourage implementation of the Course of Study guidelines. Such programmes may, for instance, focus on changing or encouraging the formation of new behavioural beliefs by providing accurate information to further develop teachers' understanding of the nature of language learning and language teaching in the Japanese senior high school context. Awareness-raising, as Kennedy and Kennedy (1996) suggested, might also be relevant in certain situations if those interested in educational reform want to "change or get teachers to question their beliefs" (p. 359). The provision of accurate information, for instance, may be particularly effective in moderating any social pressure to conform to standard teaching practices (i.e., those emphasising grammar and translation), which may arise from misconceptions regarding the kind of reading instruction required to prepare for university entrance examinations (Underwood, 2012a). Similarly, if contextual impediments, such as a lack of time to prepare lessons, are believed to be major impediments to the new curriculum, teacher education programmes may focus on realistic ways in which teachers can manage such obstacles. As I mentioned at the end of Section 3, accurate information about what teachers believe to influence their adoption or rejection of national curriculum mandates may also be used to inform and encourage school officials and boards of education to establish the necessary conditions (e.g., training, resources, and time) to enable teachers with intentions to implement the curriculum to actually do so.

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## 学習指導要領高等学校英語の発展、実行と研究事項

ポール・アンダーウッド

### 要 旨

平成 21 年告示の高等学校学習指導要領外国語は平成 25 年 4 月より施行される。この新学習指導要領は、現行学習指導要領で示されているにもかかわらず高等学校英語教育では十分に実施されているとはいいがたいコミュニケーション・アプローチを用いた教授法を推し進めるものである。本稿の目的は次の 3 点を明らかにすることである。まず新学習指導要領外国語の要点を概観し、続いて最近行われた調査に基づき、新学習指導要領を実施する際に問題となる大学入試およびその他の要因を検討し、最後に新学習指導要領を適切に実施に移す際の教育者の視点からの理論的枠組みを示すことである。

*Keywords:* Educational Policy Analysis 教育政策評価; MEXT Course of Study 文部科学省学習指導要領; Teacher Beliefs 語学教師認知; Theory of Planned Behaviour 社会心理学理論; University Entrance Examinations 大学入試試験