

Applying and Adapting the New Course of Study at Elementary School¹

Mark G. Fennelly

Shikoku University

Abstract

From 2020, a new course of study became national policy at the elementary school level requiring foreign language activities for third and fourth graders and English as an official subject for fifth and sixth graders. For classroom teachers and teacher trainers alike, it is vital that they understand the main concepts that form the basis of the Course of Study, and the teaching philosophy on which subsequent materials and textbooks are based in order to adapt them for meaningful learning in local contexts. In this paper the author aims to offer insight into the new Course of Study and the materials based on it, suggesting how this change will influence teachers working in elementary schools and in English education throughout the school system. Change in teaching practice requires changes in teacher training and it is hoped that this paper will also highlight important perspectives for teacher trainers.

2020年に新学習指導要領が導入され、小学校3・4年生外国語活動、5・6年生の教科としての外国語科が完全実施となった。学校で指導にあたる教員ももちろんのこと、教員養成関係者も新学習指導要領の要点や求めている指導のあり方を理解しなければならない。地域に応じた教育を実践するために、学習指導要領やそれをもとに作られた認定教科書や教材の理念を理解することは欠かせない。この論文では新学習指導要領の要点を明確にし、指導者や指導者養成に関わっている方々がどのような授業改革求めているかを明確にする。

Keywords: Course of Study, elementary school, language activities, goal, setting, situation

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With the new Course of Study for elementary school having been fully implemented in 2020 and the new junior high school Course of Study introduced in 2021, the new Course of Study for high school will be introduced from 2022. Due to these changes, policy regarding school language education will follow common basic philosophies and goals, new textbook materials and evaluation criteria based on these philosophies will be introduced, and it is essential that teachers and teacher trainers understand these changes. In this paper, I will focus on the main points of the new Course of Study for elementary school, as the key philosophies are the same at the junior and senior high school levels.

Ministry of Education (MEXT) Policy

The Course of Study in Japan outlines education content and goals for all registered schools. The Course of Study (hereafter CS) is updated about every 10 years and only textbooks based on the CS will be approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) and can be used in schools. Though, as Kikuchi & Browne (2009) note, the CS may not immediately influence classroom practice, it is expected that significant changes in the new CS and the materials based on it will have, over time, considerable influence on classroom practices throughout school education.

Changes in Society

Changes in society and government policies influence the content and goals outlined in the CS which often attempts to offer content to nurture young people for a yet to be seen future. Under the most recent change, issues such as globalization, an aging society and the expected influences of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on future lives and careers were at the forefront. (MEXT, 2017b)

Japan's population demographics show an aging society with an ever falling birthrate (IPSS, 2017). A future lack of labor and increasing globalization suggests that children today may work in a very different society when they come of age. Davidson (2011) and Frey & Osborne (2013) also note the influence that AI may have on the future for today's children: half of jobs are to be automated and 65% of children will be doing jobs that do not exist yet.

Globalization is a keyword in many government policies, including education. The number of non-Japanese residents in Japan increases annually with close to 3 million foreign residents by 2019 (MOJ, 2019). However, it is more in the global economy and in industry where pressure for globalization can be felt. Despite the fact that majority of

new employees in a survey by Sanno University (Sanno, 2017) believe that companies should further proceed with globalization, a large proportion (60%) are reluctant to work overseas. The largest reason stated in the survey was a lack of confidence in English ability. This lack of language confidence is thought to be a barrier to global expansion of the economy, prompting increasing pressure from the government to improve language education

Language Issues

Confidence in English, however, may not truly represent language ability. TOEFL and TOEIC rankings are often used as benchmarks to compare Japanese English abilities with other countries. Recent rankings show Japan to be performing poorly in comparison to rival countries in Asia, notably Korea and China. TOEIC (2019) rankings showed South Korea to have significantly higher scores than Japan. Performance domestically based on the 'Eiken' Step tests, which are the most widely administered language proficiency assessment tests, showed, through a government survey (MEXT, 2016) only around 36 percent of JHS/HS students reaching the third grade/grade pre-two goals respectively, falling short of the government goals of 50% by 2020.

Other countries such as China and South Korea have also been implementing and conducting English education from earlier ages in recent years. South Korea began English as a subject from third grade in 1997 and China followed suit in 2001. How much influence such a move has had on English ability is difficult to say, however, Japan feels the need to improve English ability, motivation and confidence (MEXT, 2015).

It should be noted that the government has been moving away from using these TOEIC, TOEFL and Eiken step tests as benchmarks for language ability in favor of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) attainment benchmarks.

CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was published in 2001 as a contribution to the European year of Languages. Since publication, its influence at a global level has been significant and the implications for Japan are considerable. As mentioned above, the government has moved to using the CEFR Council of Europe (2001) attainment benchmarks levels A1 (Basic) to C2 (Proficient) which are based on the use of 'Can-Do' descriptors.

CEFR had identified the five domains for language assessment as listening, speaking (interaction), speaking (production), reading and writing. The following are sample descriptors from the Common Reference Levels Self-assessment grid (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26) showing the differences between the speaking domains of interaction and production and difference in levels.

Spoken Interaction

A1: I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.

B1: I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g family, hobbies, work, travel and current events). (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26)

Spoken Production

A1: I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know.

B1 : I can connect phrases in a simple way in order to describe experiences and events, my dreams, hopes & ambitions. I can briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans. I can narrate a story or relate the plot of a book or film and describe my reactions. (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26)

As can be seen, interaction requires more impromptu language use whilst production would require a little more organization of ideas. Also, we can see how the focus of assessment moves from what students know about the language to what they can actually do with it.

The influence of CEFR on language attainment goals in Japan, as noted by Majima (2010), Haida (2020), MEXT kenshu (2017), and Nishimura-Sahi (2020), can be seen to be significant. Annual government surveys (MEXT, 2018, MEXT, 2019) also show that schools across the country have developed their own 'can-do lists' to be used for attainment targets and which emphasize the shift in focus from knowledge and skills to the ability to apply such knowledge and skills in real contexts. The new CS also

emphasizes the ability to apply what has been learned, which has led to a shift in evaluation toward the performance skills.

Implementation of English at Elementary School

As can be seen in Table 1 below, the implementation of English at the elementary school level has been slowly increasing over the last 30 years. As Matsuka & Oshiro (2008) note, the implementation followed three main stages prior to the fourth stage in 2020. In the first stage (1992-2001), MEXT began by setting up pilot schools, first in Osaka in 1992 and then at least one research school in every prefecture in Japan. Despite issues related to teacher language and teaching skills, generally positive feedback was given by pilot schools (Fennelly, 2007), leading to the second stage (2002-2010) with the implementation of the 2002 CS including the introduction of the period of integrated studies. It was under this umbrella class including international understanding that English activities were first introduced as a part of a school subject. English activities quickly spread with over 90% of schools conducting some form of English activities, and a major problem became evident; the content and regularity of English classes varied greatly among schools, even those within the same junior high school catchment area.

Table 1

The Implementation of English at Elementary School

Stage 1	1992-2001	Research Schools in each Prefecture (weekly classes 1-6 th grade)
Stage 2	2002-2010	English Activities within the Period of Integrated Studies Spreads to over 90% of schools, monthly classes, ALT/outside teachers' main role.
Stage 3	2011-2019	Foreign Language Activities as a Required Class 5th and 6th Grade. Weekly classes. Government materials. HRT more role. Improved English awareness and oral/aural skills noted. Problem with connection to JHS noted
Stage 4	2020-	3rd and 4th Grade FLA Required class. One class per week. 5th and 6th Grade English as an Official Subject. Two classes per week.

Adapted from Matsukawa and Oshiro (2008)

MEXT responded to these problems with a new CS outlined in 2008, (stage 3, 2011-2019) which prescribed uniform, once-a-week Foreign Language Activity classes using

government-developed materials and syllabi for fifth and sixth grade students. Surveys to evaluate the success of these classes (MEXT, 2016) noted improvements in students' attitudes and communicative skills; however little real measured increase in English ability was noted. A significant problem which became apparent was the gap between the oral/aural based elementary school classes and reading-writing based junior high school classes. These results influenced aspects of the present CS (stage 4) whereby students receive 140 hours of English (as a subject) over two years in the fifth and sixth grade, including and introduction to reading and writing, following 70 hours of oral/aural instruction in Foreign Language Activities classes in the third and fourth grades.

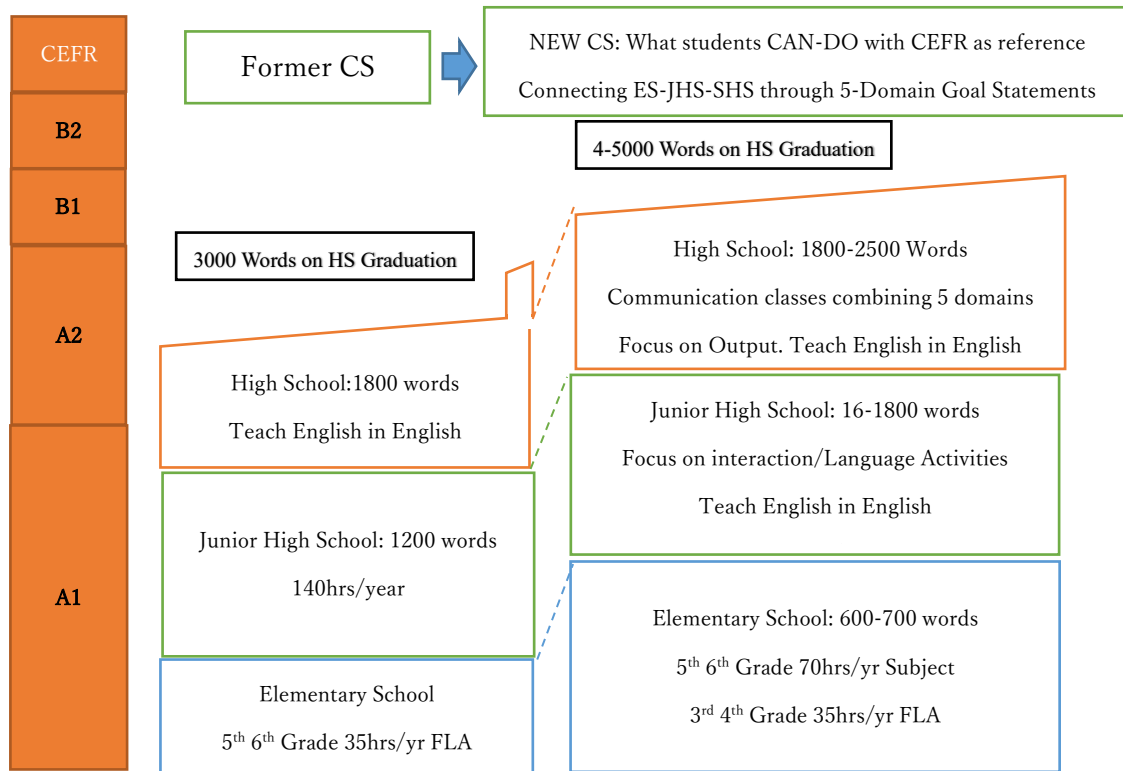
The New Course of Study

In order to foster the competencies for living in the future society MEXT (2017c) outlined three main pillars as the foundation for the new CS as follows: “**Knowledge and Skills**; what you know and what you can do! **Abilities to Think, Make Judgements and Express themselves**; how you use your knowledge and ability, and **Willingness to learn, Sense of Humanity**; how you interact with society and the word”. Through educational activities during which students apply the knowledge and skills they have attained to think, make judgements and express themselves, it is hoped that the students will develop the ability to interact with a global, ever changing society.

For foreign language study, the students are to cover five domains: Listening, Speaking (Interaction), Speaking (Production), Reading (from 5th grade), Writing (from 5th grade). Proactive, interactive and deep active learning is also emphasized. Again, the influence of CEFR on Japanese language policy can be noted. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, government attainment goals on the left side of the figure are aligned to CEFR standards.

Figure 1 shows that a significant increase in language attainment is aimed for under the new CS. The increase in the number of vocabulary words to be covered is, it is hoped, to aid in-depth communication. Educational goal statements from elementary school through high school are aligned to show common goals, and new University Entrance Exams (Kyoutsu Test) introduced in January 2021, expect students to ‘think, make judgements and express themselves’.

Figure 1
MEXT Image for Foreign Language Education



(adapted from MEXT, 2017a)

Course of Study Goals

The goal statements for the foreign language activities and education at the 3rd and 4th grade level of elementary school, the 5th and 6th grade level of elementary school and the junior high school level are outlined below.

3rd & 4th Grade Foreign Language Activities Goal:

“To develop pupils’ competencies that form the foundation of communication as outlined below through language activities of listening and speaking in a foreign language, while activating the approaches of communication, in foreign languages”.

(Translated from MEXT 2017b, p. 11)

5th and 6th Grade Foreign Language Goal:

“To develop the pupils’ competencies that form the base of communication as outlined below through language activities of listening, reading, speaking, and writing in a foreign language, while activating the approaches of communication foreign languages.”

(Translated from MEXT 2017b, p. 67)

As can be seen, the goal for language education is increasingly developed “competencies for communication” in foreign language. Common terminology can be noted as follows:

[activating the approaches of communication] [Through language activities]

In order for teachers and teacher trainers to apply the new course of study at elementary school it is important that these main points of the CS are fully understood

Approaches of Communication

“Activating the approaches of communication” is described by MEXT as follows (MEXT, 2017b, p. 11). “Taking into consideration the nationality, the culture, traditions and lifestyle of, and your relation to, the person with whom you are communicating”.

In order to achieve this, MEXT (2017b) continues to stress the importance, at the classroom level, of teachers clarifying the **Goal, Setting and Situation** for language use and also specify with whom the students will communicate. This is a move to contextualize language in real situations with real goals and a move away from traditional contrived form-focused instruction. For example, when asking students to do a presentation such as introducing their hometown, it is important to identify true goals of the presentation and specify who the students will be presenting to and what they hope to achieve through the presentation. Presenting about the local area to an ALT who lives in that area and presenting the local area to children in another country would activate very different perspectives and approaches. This would influence lexis, content, and how we communicate. Taking language out of context for practice is not thought to be beneficial when developing competencies for communication. When adapting teaching content to local contexts teachers need to be aware of these changes.

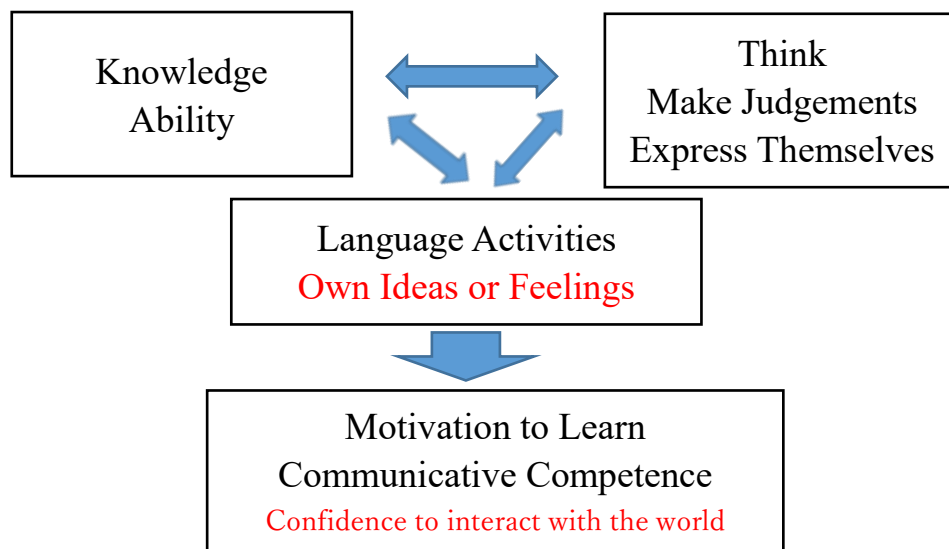
Language Activities

Another example of common terminology throughout the Course of Study goals is *through language activities* whereby the MEXT is outlining learning practices. Under the new CS, there has been a shift in the definition of *language activities*. Traditionally, in previous versions of the CS, *language activities* is a term which has been used to describe activities preparing for and conducting communication. Under the new CS, the definition of language activities is outlined as follows: *Activities through which students exchange their own ideas and feelings* (MEXT Kenshu, 2017). Language practice such as chants, pronunciation practice, drills, controlled practice and repetition, though perhaps important, are not considered to be language activities. Real language for real goals

through which students express their own ideas and feelings in context are to be the process through which students learn. This is a significant shift away from traditional audio-linguistic pattern practice, drill-based form-focused classes. As Figure 2 below shows, it is hoped that students will “think, make judgements and express themselves” applying the “knowledge and abilities” they have acquired during aforementioned language activities. Through these “language activities”, it is hoped that students will acquire further knowledge and ability which they can apply in future language activities, ultimately developing motivation and confidence in language to interact with the world.

Figure 2

The Central Role of Language Activities



Adapted from Yoshida (2018)

If the new CS is to be successful, it is essential that teachers and teacher trainers alike are aware of the change in approach implied by figure 2. The CS does offer outlines of language activities suitable for each domain and at each level. Those for speaking (Interaction) are as follows:

- b. Speaking [Interaction]
 - (a) Activities to exchange greetings with strangers and acquaintances, give instruction and make requests to the person they are communicating with and respond to or refuse them.
 - (b) Activities to communicate their own thoughts and feelings and ask and answer simple questions regarding familiar and simple topics in everyday life.

- (c) Activities to have brief conversations by answering simple questions about themselves on the spot and asking simple questions about the person they are communicating with on the spot.

(Translated from MEXT 2017b, p.106-108)

Small Talk

In line with the introduction of the new CS at the elementary school level, the government produced a guidebook (MEXT Kenshu, 2017) to help teachers understand the CS and prepare for classes. One example of language activities, implemented in classrooms around the country, is “*small talk*” The guidebook outlines goals for “small talk” as follows: To encourage language retention through opportunities to use vocabulary and phrases covered in the curriculum and develop skills to continue discourse and impromptu language use. Two different styles of “small talk” are described in the guidebook, teacher-led discourse and student chat-type activities. Through the longer teacher-led discourse, it is hoped that language can be contextualized and that students can infer meaning from context. Through chat-type activities, it is hoped that students will develop discourse skills and improve their language retention through cyclically repeated use of language related to familiar topics.

Sample:

UNIT 2 Welcome to Japan

S1: What country do you want to go to? Where do you want to go?

S2: I want to go to Italy.

S1: You want to go to Italy? That sounds nice. Why?

S2: I want to go to Canada.

S1: You want to go to Canada? That’s nice. Why?

S2: Canada is very beautiful.

(MEXT Kenshu 2017, p. 133)

In this way, students develop discourse skills through communicative shadowing, reacting, and asking follow-up questions. Reacting to impromptu questions also helps prepare students for more in-depth interaction at the junior high level.

5-Domains

Under the goal statements for the new CS, goal statements for each of the 5 domains are also outlined at each stage. The goals for Speaking (Interaction) are outlined below:

(1) Speaking [Interaction]

- a. Enable pupils to give instruction, make requests and respond using basic expressions.
- b. Enable pupils to exchange their own thoughts and feelings regarding familiar and simple topics in everyday life by using simple words, phrases and basic expressions.
- c. Enable pupils to communicate through asking and answering questions about themselves, the person they are communicating with and their surroundings by using simple words and phrases and basic expressions on the spot.

(Translated from MEXT 2017b, p.78-79)

In this way the new CS has statements outlining what the students should be able to do with language in each domain at each stage of their education, emphasizing a shift to real language use in the classroom.

Implications

This move to using real language as a mode for teaching was described by Richards and Rogers (2014) as a move from “Learning to communicate to Communicating to learn”. It is hoped that while using real language students will ‘notice’ new language and language forms through aforesaid language activities. For this paradigm shift in classroom practices in Japan to succeed true understanding of CS goals is important.

In Fennelly and Luxton (2011) the authors noted that “Many teacher trainers do not seem to understand the MEXT goals adequately and are putting emphasis on the teaching of English rather than developing a communicative experience for students”. (p. 22)

With more ambitious goals under the new CS, the understanding of teacher trainers is an increasingly important aspect of the change. It is hoped that MEXT will provide more information on the goals and the content of the CS in English for native-speaking teachers and teacher trainers.

Conclusion

The most recent Course of Study was implemented at elementary school in 2020, at junior high school in 2021 and is to be introduced at high school in 2022. The new CS attempts to address dissatisfaction with English levels, an aging and increasingly global and changing society, and expected change for children’s futures with the advances in AI.

As all government approved textbooks and materials must follow the CS it is important that teachers and teacher trainers alike be fully aware of the philosophies and goals of the CS. Significant influence from CEFR has been noted, particularly in the area of CAN-DO style goal statements and the introduction of CAN-DO lists in schools nationally. Also, following CEFR guidelines the new CS has divided speaking into the domains of interaction and production.

Notably, two main points throughout the new Courses of Study at all levels are “activating the approaches of communication” and teaching “through language activities”. This will require the contextualizing of language at the classroom level while giving students the opportunity to exchange their own ideas and feelings through real language use.

The use of “language activities” as a method of learning through communication is important to develop students’ abilities to “think, make judgements and express themselves”, and develop the “confidence to interact with the world”. At the classroom level, teachers need to be aware of the “goal, setting, and situation” for activities so that students can exchange their own ideas and feelings through meaningful and authentic language activities in context.

Bio Data

Mark G. Fennelly is a professor at Shikoku University. He has over 30 years of experience teaching and teacher training in Japan since 1990. He has been involved in the production of government and textbook materials related to and based on the Course of Study.

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