

Innovation and the Assessment of Elementary School English in Japan: Issues and Concerns

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Abstract

This study seeks to illuminate issues and concerns affecting language teaching and the assessment of English as Japan moves towards the introduction of a new English curriculum in its elementary schools. Reflecting the new curriculum goals of developing usage-based English abilities and a proactive attitude to learning, it is intended that assessment be performance-based making use of 'can do' descriptors. Additionally, it is required that innovative techniques are developed in order to assess pupils' approaches to learning. These new assessment requirements pose challenges of interpretation, development and implementation.

Key words: performance-based assessment, CEFR,
'can do' statements, assessment for learning,
innovative assessment methods

Introduction

Japan is currently in the process of carrying out reforms to its entire school English curriculum, from elementary through senior high school. As part of this process major changes are being implemented to the provision of English and how it is assessed. In part these reflect issues specific to Japan, in part changes to the wider world of language learning, our understanding of the learning process, and what it means to be a confident and communicative user of language. The study therefore briefly details recent curricular change to English education in Japan before examining key issues related to assessment at the elementary school level, notably performance-based assessment, CEFR, 'can do' statements, assessment for learning, and innovative assessment methods.

New Curriculum Guidelines

In 2017 the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) released a new course of study for elementary school education in Japan. The overarching aim is to promote proactive learning through discussion and debate, to encourage students to think creatively and independently, and to better prepare pupils for the technologically advanced, diverse and globalized world of the 21st century. The new course of study will be implemented from 2020.

The new curriculum involves extensive changes to English language education. Currently, English is required only in Years 5 and 6 and consists of 35 lessons of activity-based learning with no attention given to literacy skills and no assessment required. Nevertheless, some schools do have activity-based English in earlier years though such provision is the exception rather than the norm. Under the new curriculum English education will start earlier. Pupils in Years 3 and 4 will experience 35 lessons of activity-based learning with a focus on listening and speaking. The aim is to lay a foundation for communication abilities, to accustom pupils to English sounds and expressions and develop a proactive attitude towards communication. In Years 5 and 6 pupils will be required to take 70 lessons a year with English introduced as a formal subject, pupils doing reading and writing in addition to further building their listening and speaking skills. Pupils will be assessed for the first time. Although the wide-ranging changes across the school curriculum do not take effect until 2020, schools have the option to initiate reforms to the English curriculum in advance from the 2018 school year.

The revisions to elementary English education were proposed in response to issues related to current Year 5 and 6 activity-based lessons. Two principle concerns can be identified. Firstly, according to MEXT (2017), while pupils initially showed interest in and enjoyed the activities, it was difficult to maintain their motivation throughout the two years of the English activity curriculum. Secondly, there were perceived problems relating to the transition from elementary school to junior high school. Pupils were confused by the abrupt change from their experience of oral activity-based primary English, intended to be a fun-filled experience, and the more rigorous junior high school English classroom with its emphasis on formal language learning, literacy skills and assessment. In order to address these issues it was concluded that older children at elementary

school needed to be better prepared, that a more systematic approach to the teaching of English was required, and that it was necessary to provide a more intellectual challenge. Accordingly, it was decided to introduce English as a formal subject for Year 5 and Year 6 pupils with the development of reading and writing skills added to the curriculum.

In seeking to reflect the broader aims of the curriculum reforms—the promotion of proactive learning and creative, independent thought—the goals set for the new English curriculum for Years 5 and 6 consist of the following three components: (1) knowledge and skills, (2) thinking, discernment, expression (3) attitude to learning and cultivation of humanity (MEXT, 2017). In common with many primary programs, the goals embrace not only L2 achievement but also cognitive development and affective aims. Namely, the curriculum aims to nurture pupils' general abilities through the development of basic skills in English, skills enabling pupils to express feelings and ideas and engage in actual communication. Repeated engagement in such a learning process aims to enhance pupils' confidence and develop a proactive attitude to learning.

In addition to the specific points relating to Japan detailed above, the reforms reflect developments in our wider understanding of the nature of language learning. In recent years there has been a marked change in how language learning is perceived. Rather than learning being viewed as the acquisition of rules in the brain, often accompanied by rote learning and the memorisation of grammar and vocabulary, increasingly language learning is being interpreted from the perspective of active usage, what a learner can do. Such a conception requires a classroom that provides opportunities for active language use, contexts for the development of communication skills. In other words, the image of learning is one of “what can be done” using English in actual communication activities as opposed to one of accumulation of knowledge or property, “participation” (Sfard, 1998) rather than “acquisition.” In the notion of “participation” learning is considered *doing* rather than *having* (Sfard, 1998), requiring “the ability to communicate in the language of this community and act according to its particular norms” (Sfard, 1998, p.6) to increase community memberships. This is a perspective of learning directly relevant to a process orientated-view of language learning, *linguaging* (Swain, 2005) rather than a product-oriented view.

A further notable characteristic of the new curriculum is the aim to develop a *proactive* (MEXT, 2017) attitude to communicate using a foreign

language, in this case English. This is a notable change to the current curriculum (MEXT, 2010) in which the goal is stated as the cultivation of a *positive* attitude to communicate. The implication here is an important one. In seeking to develop a *proactive* attitude the intent of the new curriculum would appear to be not only the development of a positive attitude to communicate in English but also the creation of a self-regulated autonomous learner. Hopefully, such a learner will find the change from elementary school to junior high a relatively easy one. Additionally, a self-regulated autonomous learner has the potential to achieve more as he or she progresses through the formal school system and also has the potential to be a life-long foreign language learner.

Assessment

Under the current curriculum there is no formal assessment of Year 5 and Year 6 pupils taking English activities. Numerical assessment is considered unsuitable for a programme that aims to develop a foundation of communication abilities and the enhancement of interest and attitude, as stated in the course of study (MEXT, 2010). Under the new curriculum there will again be no formal assessment for Year 3 and Year 4 pupils as the curriculum goal is once again the development of a foundation of communication abilities. However, since English will be offered as a formal subject to Year 5 and Year 6 pupils, formal assessment will be introduced.

The incorporation of assessment within an elementary curriculum reflects international practice where innovation of primary curriculum is frequently associated with the introduction of assessment (Rixon, 2016). Rixon points out that it is common that no assessment is included at an early stage of innovation involving a foreign language programme. Among the reasons for this are, firstly, the programme needs to establish itself at the beginning of an innovation. Secondly, teachers cannot cope with the added workload of assessment on top of the teaching of the new subject itself. Thirdly, there is the ideological argument that children should not be disturbed by assessment. However, with time, as a project progresses and becomes established, a change of policy is commonly observed, a change in which assessment of attainment becomes part of the programme. Thus, although it can be argued that Japan has taken a very cautious route as it has sought to introduce English at the elementary school level, the new curriculum guidelines are part of a natural innovative process, the

introduction of assessment part of that process, one that follows international practice.

Performance-based Assessment

Within the academic literature it is widely acknowledged that assessment has a significant role to play in determining the quality of teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is indispensable to establish an appropriate assessment system that is coherent with teaching and content in order to advance and sustain an educational innovation (Andrew, 2004; Black and William, 1998; Henry, Bettinger and Braun, 2006). That is, the framework of a programme and assessment of pupil attainment are intimately related, as the means of assessment should incorporate the curriculum goals and methodology. Thus, in order for Japan and its elementary school teachers to develop appropriate assessment criteria for the new curriculum, it is important to first clarify the curriculum aims set for language, knowledge, cognitive development and other abilities and skills.

There are two types of assessment in the current literature of assessment, standards-based assessment and performance-based assessment. Standards-based assessment is outcome-oriented, conducted with the aim to enquire whether standards have been achieved and thus provide accountability of programmes. In standards-based tests, attainment levels are estimated from test scores. As a result, they may not necessarily reveal actual skills and abilities in performance though it is possible to infer skills and abilities from test scores. In performance-based assessment, in contrast, learners' performance is assessed while they are engaged in tasks that require them to use real-life skills. Performance-based assessment requires a list of explicit criteria with performance descriptors such as rubrics. For example, the *European Language Portfolio* incorporates criteria with performance descriptors set up by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001).

The new elementary level curriculum goal of increased participation and concern for "what can be done" in English requires that assessment focus on learners' abilities to function, to use English in real world situations. Accordingly, of the two forms of assessment outlined above, it is appropriate to adopt performance-based assessment, which aims to reflect the skills and abilities pupils have in actual performance, a clear stated aim

of the new curriculum. Among the techniques available and often used in performance-based assessment are holistic tasks such as role-play (often involving information gap activities), observation, written work, self-assessment via portfolio etc.

The merits of performance-based assessment are manifold. Firstly, it is a child friendly way of assessment, compared to standards-based assessment. A common suggestion in the literature is that teaching and learning should be conducted in an anxiety-reduced environment (Stevick 1990; Krashen 1982; Asher 1988). Compared with pencil-and-pen tests often adopted in standards-based assessment, tasks used in performance-based assessment may be found to be motivating, interesting and engaging for young learners. Thus, their performance may reflect their abilities better as they actively engage in tasks. Additionally, it is possible to integrate learning and teaching experiences by providing learning opportunities in performance-based assessment. During assessment, teachers are able to assist pupil learning by providing scaffolding while engaged in tasks. Performance assessment can also be used for diagnostic purposes, enabling teachers to assess learners by identifying their ZPDs, judging which pupils need what assistance to accomplish tasks.

Despite the advantages listed above, however, performance-based assessment poses problems. If assessment is performed at the level of the individual learner, that is, if learning is considered to be the acquisition of skills by an individual learner, then the difficulty arises in determining / isolating individual performance in a task that requires joint performance. Additionally, some teachers may find it difficult to adjust their mind-set, to adjust from a traditional view of and approach to assessment to an innovative approach based on performance. Teachers will be required, not only to develop a sufficient understanding of the concepts underlying performance-based assessment, but will also be required to develop skills appropriate to implementation. Finally, teachers may find the adoption of performance-based assessment time-consuming, the requirement to assess oral performance and written works more demanding than pencil-and-paper tests.

CEFR and 'Can Do' Descriptors

The CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001) is a framework for performance-based assessment widely used in Europe. It was created based on a model

of communicative language use, consisting of six levels ranging from Basic (A1, A2), Independent (B1, B2), and Proficient levels (C1, C2). The *European Language Portfolio* is part of the CEFR, and is used as a self-assessment instrument for documenting a learner's personal development (Council of Europe, 2001). Today the CEFR framework has been adopted worldwide. With its clear focus upon communicative language use, CEFR offers a highly pertinent model for Japan to copy or adapt, one with the potential to make a significant impact on English education. Indeed, a version developed specifically for the Japanese context (CEFR-J) already exists (Negishi, Takada & Tono, 2012). As expressed in the curriculum guidelines (MEXT, 2017), the goal of English education in Japan is shifting to action-oriented language education, enabling learners to use English in actual communication in the globalized world, rather than to accumulate knowledge for entrance examinations. Thus, a framework such as that provided by CEFR, one that provides global standards of performance and defines abilities to function in communicative contexts, is highly relevant as Japan seeks to reform English education across the school system.

A 'can do' list is a list of descriptors that describe what learners can do in a language, compiled based on an action-oriented perspective of language learning. MEXT (2012) proposed that each junior and senior high school develop a 'can do' list and make use of it to enable students to reach curricular goals. Considering the goals of the new curriculum guidelines (MEXT, 2017), it is implied that elementary schools draw up their own 'can do' lists. The expectation is that adoption of a 'can do' list will promote action-orientated performance-based English education. Furthermore, that this will encourage learners to be more self-regulated and autonomous by assessing their own abilities and motivating them to improve.

A number of criticisms have been levelled at the CEFR and 'can do' descriptors. Firstly, the CEFR is, as its name suggests, simply a framework, general guidelines that provide a common basis for describing language proficiency. Thus, the CEFR is not prescriptive and consequently it is incumbent upon teachers and practitioners to develop their own personal or institutional goals and guidelines suitable for their own specific educational context. Additionally, there is no direct specification of tasks appropriate for each of the descriptors (Jones, 2002). Teachers not only have to devise their own tasks in order to elicit a required performance but also create their own 'can do' statements and rubrics for each task. This can be both onerous and time-consuming. Thus, the use of CEFR for

performance-based assessment presents not only a challenge to teachers' abilities and skills to devise a framework appropriate for their context, but it also requires considerable time, effort and dedication to devise appropriate tasks and 'can do' lists. In addition, performance frequently requires more than a simple can do yes or no judgement. Often it is a matter of degree, of how well a pupil can accomplish a task and whether he or she can do so independently or only with the assistance of others. All of this in a profession widely acknowledged to be overworked already.

A further criticism of the CEFR relates to its suitability when applied to the young learner. The CEFR was originally created for adult learners who are assumed to use foreign languages in the real world. As Hasselgren (2005) points out, children do not have the life experiences of adults in using foreign languages. Accordingly, direct use of the CEFR as currently devised appears inappropriate for young learners, suggesting that in adopting the CEFR there is a need to devise guidelines specifically for young learners by giving thought to what skills and topics are suitable for children in terms of their cognitive and social development, interests and experiences (Nikolov, 2016). A further issue arises as a result of the slow rate of linguistic development among young learners. The wide bands of CEFR make it difficult to document this process of slow development (Bret-Blasco, 2014). Indeed, in reality, many Japanese primary children's level of proficiency may even be below CEFR band A1 when they finish primary education. Consequently, in order to cope with this issue, it appears appropriate to further subdivide the CEFR levels of attainment, something that CEFR-J has sought to accomplish for use at the primary level in Japan. Finally, the CEFR levels as originally devised had a specific focus, levels of language use and proficiency. They were not devised with the aims of the new elementary school curriculum in mind with its wider range of achievement goals incorporating not only the development of linguistic skills but also other educational aims such as attitude and cognitive skills.

Assessment for Learning

The purpose for which assessment is being conducted is also a factor to take into account. Two distinct purposes can be identified, assessment of learning and assessment for learning. Assessment of learning, which is often measurement-based, seeks to elicit information in order to make accurate and consistent inferences about a learner's true ability (Brookhart,

2003). Assessment for learning, on the other hand, seeks to elicit information in order to enable learners to reflect on their performance and understanding and to enable learners to make use of this information to improve their learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshal & Willima, 2003; Black and William, 1998; Brookhart, 2003). In the process, it is expected that learners will develop an awareness of the goals of their own learning, how these are to be achieved, and the steps required (Rixon, 2016).

Within the field of primary English the second of these two approaches, assessment for learning, has become a focus of attention and increased adoption, an additional tool for the teacher to call upon. It provides an approach to learning in which teachers, through the provision of scaffolding that assists and enables pupils to reflect on their L2 learning, thereby seek to stretch their learning potential (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002). Considering the curriculum goals described in the new course of study for schools in Japan, goals that emphasize the development of proactive and autonomous learners, assessment for learning appears to be a suitable approach to adopt within the English classroom, one promoting autonomy and self-determination.

The adoption and use of assessment for learning is an attractive proposition. Nevertheless, despite the attractiveness, implementation is unlikely to be a simple process. Assessment for learning requires of teachers an ability to interpret and diagnose learners' foreign language development and to provide appropriate assistance (Edelenbos & Kubanek-German, 2004). McNamara and Roever (2006) make a similar point, suggesting that the teaching process should be sensitive to learner readiness for development. Such sensitivity can then be used to inform and shape what the teacher should do next in support of learning. That is, teacher awareness and sensitivity have pivotal roles to play in assessment for learning, as does their ability to respond in an appropriate and supportive manner. For Japan, where regular classroom teachers, non-English specialists, will be responsible for conducting English classes within elementary schools, this raises questions over the suitability of assessment for learning and how the aims of the new curriculum are to be successfully achieved, how teachers are to develop the ability and skills required to carry out assessment for learning. In practical terms this is likely to call for in-service teacher training in order to 1) upgrade teachers' English ability, 2) develop greater teacher awareness and understanding of the process of language development, and 3) provide training in effective

instructional and interactive skills in the domain of English language teaching. Here, teachers and schools will find themselves dependent on central and local government support or, as appears more likely, dependent on their own commitment, initiative and enthusiasm.

Self-Assessment

Within the assessment for learning tools available to learners and teachers is that of self-assessment (SA), a technique already used in Japanese elementary schools under the current English activity curriculum. SA has increasingly drawn attention within language learning programmes at all levels. In particular, it is regarded as a learner friendly method of assessment and thus considered a means of assessment for learning particularly suited to young learners. An example is the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP), “a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can reflect on and record their language-learning and intercultural experiences” (CILT, 2006) and now in widespread use across Europe since its launch in 2001. In the UK this takes the form of the *My Languages Portfolio*, a version validated for use by children and described as follows:

My Languages Portfolio is:

- a learning tool;
- a means of celebrating children’s language-learning experiences;
- an open-ended record of children’s achievements in languages;
- a document which can be kept by the child or the teacher;
- a valuable source of information to aid transfer to the next class or school.

My Languages Portfolio aims to introduce primary school children to a language-learning process which lasts for life. It helps children to:

- become more aware of the importance and value of knowing different languages;
- value and promote cultural diversity;
- reflect on and evaluate ways in which they learn;
- develop responsibility for their learning;
- build up knowledge and understanding. (CILT, 2006)

All of the above fit well with the stated goals of the new curriculum and are specifically focused upon the needs of the young learner. The *My Languages Portfolio* for example makes use of 'can do' speech bubbles incorporating 'can do' statements. In the US there is the *Lingua Folio Junior* (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages, 2014) based on the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines.

Although self-assessment is now widely used, there are nevertheless a number of reservations about the use of it, particularly among policy makers and practitioners, reservations mainly concerned with subjectivity and accuracy (Butler, 2016). If assessment is conducted from an assessment of learning perspective, a perspective that aims at inferring accurate and consistent learner ability from information obtained making use of SA, accuracy and subjectivity may be an issue. However, if SA is conducted from the perspective of assessment for learning purposes, SA has the undoubted potential to provide learners with information about their learning, to enable learners to reflect on their learning, and to make formative decisions for further development. If the primary purpose of assessment is to enhance learner development rather than rank learners by ability, then the benefits of SA far outweigh concerns for accuracy and subjectivity and well serve the needs of the new curriculum. SA aims to promote self-regulatory and autonomous learning (Black and Williams, 1998; Blanche & Merion, 1989; Butler and Lee, 2010; Dickinson, 1987; Oscarson, 1989), clearly stated as one of the goals in the new elementary English curriculum (MEXT, 2017).

A major issue in the adoption of SA for learning purposes is how to promote teacher's understanding of the process involved and of the techniques available for providing support. In other words, teachers need to know "how SAs enhance children's self-reflection, how both children and their teachers make inferences about the children's current and potential level of understanding, what kinds of actions were taken and their impact on children's learning" (Butler, 2016, p. 312). According to Butler's model of process, firstly assessment should be consistent with the instruction provided and there should be an appropriate selection of tasks. It is also necessary to provide assistance to facilitate learner autonomy. In particular, it is indispensable to provide training to develop children's metacognition and monitoring of their learning. A clear presentation of the goals and criteria of assessment by the teacher also serve to assist

children's SA. Additionally, SA should be conducted recursively. It is through the repetition of feedback and assistance that self-reflection and learning are facilitated.

Although SA for learning and SA of learning need to be differentiated, issues raised concerning the lack of accuracy and subjectivity in SA of learning illuminate difficulties children may experience in SA for learning contexts. According to Butler (2016), children may experience difficulty in comprehending SA items owing to the high level of mental processing required for interpretation. As a result, this may influence the level accuracy required in SA of learning. Thus, she suggests that item construction and task choice should be conducted with due regard to the level of children's cognitive development, paying attention to wording, contextualization, point of reference and purpose. Such attention should also be paid to item construction in SA for learning, as comprehension of SA items is a prerequisite if pupils are to appropriately reflect on their performance. Butler also points out an issue related to subjectivity. It is generally observed that children's self-appraisal is usually highly positive due to their underdeveloped cognitive ability, something that varies depending on age, task familiarity and social experience. Although accurate inference of pupil abilities is not a goal in SA for learning, raising pupils' ability to assess their own performance and growth objectively is required. Thus, there is a need for teachers to provide assistance and training in order to develop children's metacognition and self-monitoring of learning.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to illuminate issues involved in the introduction and assessment of English at the elementary school level in Japan following reforms to the national school curriculum announced by MEXT. The study first outlined the new national guidelines for English education at the primary level, curricular reforms that inevitably call for related changes to assessment of learner progress and learner outcomes. The new guidelines aim at the development of action-oriented language use and, in so doing, call for the promotion of performance-based assessment, 'can do' descriptors, assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning. Here the experience of other nations in the use of SA techniques, notably individual language portfolios, appears highly appropriate. Equally

important is the need to build teacher awareness of action-oriented language use, the nature of performance-based assessment, and to equip them with the skills and techniques required for successful implementation of the new curriculum in 2020.

Future research implications include empirical studies to explore what impact the reforms have on teachers, pupils and teaching practices once the new curriculum is implemented. Some of the questions to which answers might be sought are: 1) How do teachers assess performance in daily practice? 2) How do teachers diagnose pupils' development? 3) How do teachers provide feedback to enhance pupil learning while building and maintaining pupil motivation? 4) How do teachers make use of innovative assessment techniques such as SA, and peer assessment? 5) How accurate or useful is student self-assessment? These appear highly relevant questions to which answers should be sought if the far-reaching innovations being introduced are themselves to be assessed and successfully achieved.

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