

Critical Assessment of the New *Course of Study*  
for Upper Secondary Schools  
—Proposals for Foreign Language Education in Japan<sup>1</sup>—

Osamu Miyata

I. Introduction

Edwin O. Reischauer (1964:295) refers to the necessity of effective English education as early as in 1964:

English is the chosen medium for communication with the outside world but despite prodigious efforts on the part of millions of students from the seventh grade on into university and about 60,000 full-time English teachers, the results have been meager. As a consequence, the Japanese are handicapped in almost all of their foreign contacts.

According to Takao Suzuki (1987:72-6), We are now facing "the mutually dependent internationalization in which Japan will have complex interests in many other countries." In order to cope with this type of internationalization, the Japanese way of communication, which is the communication not in words but in heart (communication by telepathy), would not be of any help. He says, "In world affairs, a Japanese cannot assert himself, defeat the other party, make cynical remarks, and hit at the other's Achilles' heel in a full command of English. This is because English education in Japan has been headed in the wrong direction. We should improve English education in such a way as to use English as a weapon" (1987:246).

The necessity of communicative competence had been advocated for a few decades by countless people, and at last the Japanese government undertook the reforms of foreign education in Japan. The new *Course of Study* was made public on 15 March 1989. The guidelines for the improved curriculum are to be put into effect in 1993 for middle schools and in 1994 for high schools.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a general overview of the new *Course of Study*, discuss a number of problems associated with its implementation, and consider what should be needed for the improvement of foreign language education in Japan.

## II. The Process of Reforms and New High School English

### 1. The improvement of the guidelines

As stated in *Kotogakko Gakushushidoyoryo Kaisetsu: Gaikokugo* [Commentary on Course of Study for Upper Secondary Schools: Foreign Languages] (1989:3), in recent years, advances in technology and economy have brought us not only material richness but also remarkable changes in every phase of our society: we have entered the age of information technology, internationalization, diversified values, increased nuclear families and elderly population, etc. These changes seem to be more and more important.

In order to cope with these social changes, the reforms of the school education system in Japan have been discussed from all angles. *Chuo Kyoiku Shingikai* 'the Central Council for Education' and *Rinji Kyoiku Shingikai* 'the Interim Council for Education' have been making drastic proposals to reform primary and secondary school education. *Rinji Kyoiku Shingikai* released the final report on 7 August 1987. The issue of internationalization is taken up in it:

The world is becoming smaller at a surprising speed and there is a greater degree of mutual dependency needed in an international society... We have entered the new age of internationalization in which we will not be able to continue developing without sharing the responsibility of performing our duties as a member of an international society... (1988:273).

As a reform to cope with internationalization, the report refers to the necessity to improve foreign language education as follows:

As far as foreign language education, specifically English language education is concerned, much emphasis

should be laid upon acquiring English as an international language for communication. In this regard, radical reforms must be carried out for English education from middle school to university (1988:297-8).

Based on the final report by *Rinji Kyoiku Shingikai, Kyoikukatei Shingikai* 'the National Council on Education Reform' released the final report on foreign language education on 24 December 1987 (*Gakushushido-yoryo Kaisetsu*, 1989:6-7):

(1) It is important for middle and high school students to acquire communicative competence and develop the basis for international understanding so that they can cope with internationalization and live in an international society.

(2) In this connection, care must be taken so that students can further develop their ability of listening and speaking, with due consideration of abundant reading and writing activities.

(3) Efforts should be made so that students will acquire the communicative competence of a foreign language, and have a keener interest in foreign countries and better understanding of them.

## 2. The objectives of high school English

It is clear that the preceding three guidelines represent the government's positive attitudes towards internationalization and emphasize the importance of language activities for communication, focusing on listening and speaking skills that we have long tended to ignore. To realize these guidelines, the objectives of high school English education were provided as follows (*Gakushushido-yoryo*, 1989:108):

To develop the students' ability to understand English and express themselves in English, *to develop the positive attitude towards communicating in English*, to deepen their interest in languages and cultures, and to develop international understanding (italics mine).

The italicized part is newly added to the present objectives of high school English education made public in 1978.

### 3. New subjects of high school English

Although the present curriculum consists of seven subjects: *English I* (four skills), *English II* (advanced four skills), *English IIA* (conversation), *English IIB* (further advanced reading), and *English IIC* (further advanced writing), the new one offers six subjects to achieve the new objectives of high school English education as follows (*Gakushushidoyoryo Kaisetsu*, 1989:7-57):

*English I* and *English II* are to be offered to develop the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. *Oral Communication A* is to be offered to develop the students' ability of listening and speaking. The goal is to grasp in everyday communication what others intend to communicate and express their own thoughts in English.

*Oral Communication B* is to be offered to develop students' listening ability. The goal is to grasp the exact content of discourse.

*Oral Communication C* is to be offered to further develop students' speaking ability. The goal is to communicate thoughts in discussion and attain the positive attitude towards communicating in English through speeches, discussions, etc.

*Reading* is to be offered to further develop the students' ability of reading comprehension. The goal is to grasp what writers intend to communicate.

*Writing* is to be offered to further develop the students' ability to communicate their thoughts clearly in writing paragraphs or passages.

All these subjects place much emphasis on developing the positive attitude towards communicating in English. So even in *Reading*, students are expected to communicate in speech or writing the main ideas from the text which they read.

### III. Problems with Each Individual Teacher

In the preceding section, we considered what the new guidelines aimed for. When it comes to the implementation of the new guidelines, we face these problems: (1) how to conduct communication-oriented language education and how to motivate students to positively participate in communication; (2) whether teachers are communicatively competent enough to conduct such education and how to improve their own communicative competence. The most serious problem we may encounter in the classroom is (3) how to evaluate students' communicative attitudes. In this section, we will discuss (1) and (3). The in-service training of teachers, which is closely related to improving communicative competence on the part of teachers, is dealt with in the next section, as it should be regarded as an education policy by the government.

#### 1. How to conduct communication-oriented high school English education.

A questionnaire titled "Problems with Oral Communication" was answered by 99 English teachers of 12 high schools in Tokushima Prefecture. 68 teachers replied that it was necessary to introduce Oral Communication into the high school curriculum. Their claim is that they should teach Oral Communication in one way or another in order to have students understand different cultures and develop the ability to communicate with foreigners. However, only 38 out of the 68 teachers wish to have classes where Oral Communication is used. This fact shows that many teachers have difficulty teaching Oral Communication. Then, what should we do to be successful in communication-oriented English education?

First, we should use the target language in every possible English class in order to give students plenty of "comprehensible input"—"language that contains structure a bit beyond their current level of competence" (Krashen, 1982:21). We are not under social circumstances where we communicate in English in everyday communication. Therefore, English input is severely restricted. Most input is, in fact, provided in the classroom. Nevertheless, students have been encouraged to speak before they have received

plenty of input. According to Krashen's view, "when there is enough of it [input], production ability emerges" (1982:22). Postovsky reports "the effects of delay in oral practice." He found that "students who were learning Russian intensively in a six-hour-per-day program, with initial delay in oral practice, achieved better results than the students who were exposed to massive oral practice from the very beginning of the course" (1977:18). Given plenty of input, students will naturally come to comprehend sounds, the meaning of words, and structures. They will become used to speaking English in communicative situations at a certain point in time. Krashen criticizes the grammar-translation method from the viewpoint that "grammar-translation provides scraps of comprehensible input. . . . The model sentences are usually understandable, but the focus is entirely on form, and not meaning" (1982:128).

Secondly, content is more important than form in communication. That is why grammar should not be referred to in the course of communication. Krashen points out, "Grammar use should be restricted to situations where it will not interfere with communication" (1982:57). It may seem difficult for students to have typical discussions and debates in the first grade, but the most important thing is that they struggle with the language to convey their own ideas within the range of their vocabulary. They need not express every word in English in early stages. They should not be required to speak complete sentences. Nor should they be required to use "big words" or complicated structures.

Thirdly, teachers must change. Warm human relationships between teachers and students will activate communication classes. It is mutually communicative relationships that are really needed in the classroom, not teacher-centered instruction.

Lastly, children should be educated to develop their communicative attitudes at an early age. It would be difficult to have communication-oriented education for the first time in high schools. We should, at least, start educating children in primary school education in such a way that they will clearly express their points of view or intentions. Then, in high schools, speeches are included in the new curriculum of the Japanese language.<sup>3</sup> In the homeroom period as well, students will be directed to communicate

their thoughts effectively. In this way, English teachers would be able to develop students' communicative attitudes in cooperation with teachers of other subjects.

## 2. Evaluation of communicative attitudes

It is a very difficult problem to evaluate communicative attitudes in class, because it seems liable to be very subjective. Evaluation should be done in a way that will have a positive effect on the students' progress. In other words, our evaluation should motivate students to communicate.

We should first aim for communicative competence rather than linguistic competence. In beginning stages we should evaluate the students' ability to understand and communicate ideas in given situations, rather than evaluation of pronunciation, morphology, and syntax. As Krashen points out, "using an approach in the classroom which emphasizes the ability to exchange messages and at the same time testing only the ability to apply grammar rules correctly, is an invitation to a disaster" (1985:165).

As far as evaluation is concerned, if students are informed of its criteria beforehand, they will surely try to respond positively hoping to be highly evaluated. Each individual school should work out for the effective evaluation. It would be well to get some hints from the evaluation measure of physical education, music, arts, homemaking, etc. It might also be a good idea to evaluate for rating in order to be able to quickly evaluate students' communicative effectiveness in the classroom.

We will see an example of ratings:

| Items           | Grade of evaluation | Examples of evaluation |
|-----------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| a attitude      | E Excellent         | aG attitude Good       |
| i idea          | G Good              | fP fluency Poor        |
| f fluency       | F Fair              | iE idea Excellent      |
| e explicitness  | P Poor              |                        |
| v vocabulary    | I Incomplete        |                        |
| p pronunciation |                     |                        |
| g grammar       |                     |                        |

Anyway, if a student responds to a question as in "Yes, I do," he will not be highly evaluated. If he answers like, "Yes, I do, because I like...", he will get higher evaluation because he has a will to fill a communication gap. Students' positive attitudes should be effectively evaluated in class as well as on regular tests, so that they will be motivated to communicate.

#### IV. Problems with Education Policies by the Government

However hard each individual teacher may try to carry out the new guidelines, there remain some problems beyond his reach. The following problems are concerned with education policies by the government.

##### 1. The in-service training system

It is the most serious problem for a large number of English teachers to improve their own command of English before the new *Course of Study* is put into effect. Lado comments in *the Daily Yomiuri* (22 Aug. 1991), "One who does not speak English cannot teach it. To know English means the ability to speak, understand, read and write it." We cannot imagine a piano instructor who cannot play the piano. Nor can we imagine an English teacher who cannot speak the language. All English teachers know that very well. They think they need to improve their own communicative competence independently. At the present time, they have lots of opportunities to brush up English at home by using various cassettes and video tapes, bilingual and satellite TV programs, etc. However, the fact is that their daily routine keeps them very busy and no time of their own study. They could concentrate on teaching and studying without doing any extracurricular activities and school duties, but it is impossible for most teachers. Many teachers wish that they could study abroad in the summer whenever a new school year starts, but they know they cannot realize this. If they work for busy schools, they must go to work for almost everyday during summer vacation.

It is true that teachers themselves should brush up their own communicative competence in their own way, but at the same time the government should make a drastic plan for the in-service training



system. As far as the in-service training system of English teachers is concerned, the Education Ministry lacks policies. It is certain that it is providing teachers with overseas training programs such as short term programs (two-week or one-month programs), two-month programs, six-month programs, special one-year programs, but these programs are confined to a handful of lucky teachers specially chosen.

I would like to propose that the Education Ministry formulate a system of sending every English teacher to universities in the United States or Britain or any other English-speaking countries *for a year every ten years* at least. Then every teacher could have overseas training three times while he is a teacher. He would be communicatively competent and familiar with foreign cultures. It is really impossible to implement the innovative English education without further training English teachers. The Education Ministry should seriously tackle the issue of training English teachers before it hires a great number of AETs (Assistant English Teachers) for high salaries.

## 2. Class size

At present, even in language classes, the average number of students in the classroom is 46 (in the case of Aichi Prefectural High Schools). Is it possible at all to develop students' communicative competence to the desirable extent in such a large class? Takao Kimura proposes (1989:219-21):

*Small class and intensive course in English.* I would like to have this realized in the education system nationwide. We should teach English and other languages at the class size of 15 at universities, 20 at high schools, and 25 at middle schools, if possible. In the United States, they could not at all imagine that they would have 40 or 50 students in the classroom to teach English or Spanish. When an American learned the Japanese situation, he cried, "That's impossible!" I imagine that the Japanese situation would be beyond his comprehension (italics mine).

In the present situation, it seems impossible for a student to have the opportunity to achieve excellence in terms of communicative competence. A teacher with 46 or more students in the classroom could have little chance of structuring friendly relationships with every student. Only a limited number of students could have the chance to communicate in English with the teacher in the true sense of the word. In a small class, all the students are likely to be more easily motivated to communicate because a teacher finds it easy to take care of his students as their caretaker.

Children are decreasing in number across the nation, but it would take many years before the number of students in one class becomes less than 30. We cannot just wait and see. We must realize the ideal class size in the range of 20 to 30 as soon as possible. Therefore, the government has to take drastic steps to reduce the number of students in the classroom.

### 3. University entrance examinations

The Education Ministry's Advisory Committee gave its view in an article titled "Foreign Language Committee Seeks to Improve System" carried by *the Daily Yomiuri* (25 Apr. 1991): "Many people point out that Japanese students cannot gain competency in conversational English because most entrance exams stress grammar-and translation-oriented English." The committee admits that university entrance examinations have had an adverse effect upon high school English education.

Will the content and quality of university entrance examinations be reexamined? According to the questionnaire (mentioned on page 19), 20 out of the 99 English teachers predict that university entrance examinations will not change at all (75 predict a partial change and 2 predict a radical change). Most teachers have pessimistic views about reforms of university entrance examinations. It is true that colleges and universities giving "listening comprehension tests" are increasing in number, but those institutions are still the exceptions.

The results of the same questionnaire tell us further about high school teachers' views as to what kind of entrance examinations they consider desirable (99 teachers are required to choose 2 items

out of 7):

- (1) The questions to evaluate listening comprehension and speaking ability should be added to the present system (49 replies).
- (2) Listening comprehension tests should be added to the present system (32 replies).
- (3) Writing a composition should be substantially increased (21 replies).
- (4) Speaking ability should be tested by native speakers (18 replies).
- (5) The present reading comprehension and grammar tests should be decreased: listening comprehension tests should be increased up to 50 % of the test (11 replies).
- (6) The present examination system should remain unchanged (11 replies; one typical reason is that reading ability is more important than speaking ability for higher education).
- (7) The present examination system should be completely abolished: only listening comprehension tests should be given (2 replies).

High school teachers doubt that university entrance examinations will radically change, but they still hope against hope that the rate of listening comprehension tests will be increased, that speaking ability will be tested, and that writing ability will be judged by creative writing, not grammatical accuracy.

If university entrance examinations change, then will high school English education change? Or if high school English education changes, then will university entrance examinations change? It seems as if it is a matter of "the chicken and the egg", but in conclusion, university entrance examinations must be reformed so that high schools will be able to conduct communication-oriented foreign language education.

## V. Conclusion

Foreign language education in Japan is often criticized for not

having been successful despite the fact that students spend ten years studying English from middle school to university. However, if we ascribe a failure in foreign language education in terms of communicative competence to the defects in our foreign language teaching methodology, it seems off the point.

For one thing, the government should be blamed for the lack of education policies. Up to now it had had no respect for communicative competence. It has disregarded short class hours (1,200 hours up to university education is about one-fourth of the standard hours demanded by the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State<sup>4</sup>), the establishment of proper language acquisition environments which make intensive learning possible, and the training of foreign language teachers.

For another, we have been receiving education from kindergarten to university in the Japanese language alone. We have not had the necessity to acquire foreign languages as a means of communication within the country or the education system, though we always needed the ability to read foreign languages to acquire foreign technologies, science, and cultures. Therefore, it is natural that we have not developed communicative competence in foreign languages.

Now we have entered the age of internationalization, and we need direct human contacts with the rest of the world. It is our turn to make a contribution to the rest of the world which has offered a tremendous amount for our development. In order to cope with internationalization, the Education Ministry has undertaken the reforms of the school education system and defined the future course of foreign language education for young people who will live in the 21st century. The goal has become *the development of positive attitudes towards communicating in foreign languages*.

We have discussed a number of fundamental problems we may encounter when we try to reach this goal. First, I have proposed that the target language be used on every possible occasion to supplement severely restricted input and to motivate students to communicate. Some other issues will have to be discussed in a future study; for instance, the roles of reading to provide more input, good textbooks which motivate students to learn, the ways to improve reading ability in addition to communicative competence, etc.

Secondly, I have proposed that the government adopt drastic education policies: (1) the decrease in teachers' school duties and the increase in their in-service training abroad, (2) the establishment of ideal language acquisition environments, and (3) reforms of university entrance examinations. The government will have to substantially increase the expenditures for education.

Thirdly, as for university education, I would like to propose that English teachers conduct the intensive training of spoken English in small classes and produce situations where instruction is given in English. Takao Suzuki proposes using "Englic", a kind of English which is free to the utmost extent from the way of thinking, culture, idiomatic expressions and pronunciation peculiar to native English speakers, as an international language. He suggests that "English teachers communicate their thoughts and comments on students' opinions in Englic" (1975:217-27).

Lastly, the relationships between universities and high schools as well as high schools and middle schools should be reinforced. We should frequently have research sessions and conferences on foreign language education between universities, high schools, and middle schools in order to discuss the curricula from middle school to university, how to carry them out, and the teaching methodology. We should build up close relationships between these three educational institutions and promote continuing education from middle school to university.

Japan will not start following a path towards a genuinely internationalized society before the Japanese nation stands up together for the improvement of foreign language education. The most important problem we must solve urgently at any cost is the radical reforms of foreign language education.

#### Notes

1 The term "Upper Secondary School" is confined to the names of government publications here. The rest of this paper uses "high schools" for senior high schools and "middle schools" for junior high schools.

This paper is concerned with theoretical study. Practical

research will be discussed at the first opportunity.

2. The results of this questionnaire were reported at *Dai 17 Kai Zenkoku Eigo Kyoikugakkai Kagawa Kenkyutai* 'Kagawa Research Convention of the 17th Federation of English Language Education Societies in Japan' on 20 Aug. 1991.

3. *Kokugo Hyogen* 'Japanese Expression' contains speeches. See *Monbusho* 'the Ministry of Education', *Kotogakko Gakushushidoyoryo* [Course of Study for Upper Secondary Schools] (Tokyo: Okurasho Insatsukyoku, 1989) p. 14.

4. Yukio Sasaki, *Oyo Gengogaku: Riron to Jissen* [Applied Linguistics: Theory and Practice] (Tokyo: New current International Co., Ltd., 1991) p. 252.

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