

# **Nurturing Literacy Development in Elementary School English Education: Issues and Challenges Regarding Curriculum Management**

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## **小学校英語教育における識字能力の育成 ——カリキュラム・マネジメントに関わる問題と課題——**

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It is not widely acknowledged by the public, but elementary school English education in Japan has a background of approximately two decades of government-led initiatives. Despite this fact, there are various issues and problems. The early introduction of English learning for Grades 3 and 4 and the inclusion of English lessons as a subject for Grades 5 and 6 were driven by a substantial disparity between elementary and junior high school English education. This disparity resulted mainly from inadequate implementation of reading and writing instruction, often overlooking students' gradual literacy development. To address such concerns and promote uniformity in lesson objectives and content, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) introduced the government-authorized textbooks for Grades 5 and 6. However, crucial issues regarding students' literacy development persist, due primarily to the shortage of agentic teachers who can take the lead in curriculum management. This paper focuses on the development of literacy skills in the realm of elementary school English education and discusses relevant issues and challenges regarding curriculum management.

一般的に広く認知されているとは言えないが、日本の小学校英語教育の背景には、政府主導による約20年の取り組みがある。それにも拘わらず、様々な課題や問題が未解決の状態にある。3・4年次児童への英語学習の早期化と、5・6年次児童を対象とした英語教育の教科化が施行された主な理由は、小学校と中学校の英語教育における乖離が問題視されたためである。その乖離は、小学校児童に特有の漸進的な識字能力の発達を無視した、不適切な「読むこと・書くこと」の指導が頻繁に実践されたことに起因する。これらの問題に対応するために、また授業目的と内容の均一化を図るために、文部科学省は、5・6年次児童への教科指導で使用する検定教科書を導入した。しかし、カリキュラム・マネジメントに率先して取り組むことができる教員が不足しているため、小学校児童の識字能力育成に関わる懸念は払拭されていない。本稿は、小学校英語教育における識字能力育成に焦点をあて、カリキュラム・マネジメントに関わる重要な課題と問題を考察する。

## **Introduction**

Elementary school English education in Japan has a history of over 20 years of government-led initiatives (JES 20th Anniversary Commemorative Publication Committee [JES 20th], 2020). In 1992, three schools in Osaka prefecture were designated by the government as

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research sites, well ahead of other regions. These schools, namely Sanadayama Elementary School, Ajihara Elementary School, and Takatsu Junior High School, embarked on curriculum development under the theme of “Education to Promote International Understanding, Including English Learning.” Subsequently, in the academic year 1993, two more schools received this designation, followed by an additional 12 schools in the academic year 1994, and an additional 34 schools in the academic year 1996. These designations aimed to investigate goals, learning materials, and instructional methods for English teaching in conjunction with the curriculum development efforts focused on “Education to Promote International Understanding.” By the year 2006, it became evident that approximately 95% of elementary schools nationwide were implementing some form of English language activities. As interest and enthusiasm grew, there was a gradual increase in expectations for the introduction of English language education targeting elementary school students who are highly interested and sensitive to auditory linguistic stimuli.

As we entered the 2000s, therefore, English language activities became a part of the curriculum known as the “Period of Integrated Study,” introduced by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT). This marked the official beginning of English education in elementary schools for Grades 5 and 6 (MEXT, 2001a). The primary aim of these English activities was not to help students develop their English language skills and communicative competence but to promote their awareness of internationalization. Consequently, the content of lessons and teaching methods employed in local schools varied considerably. This variability in approach resulted in differences in students’ learning outcomes, a matter that drew discussion and scrutiny from local schoolteachers and scholars. As for the implementation of these English language activities, MEXT stressed the importance of “preventing elementary school students from developing the feeling of inadequacy in learning English” (MEXT, 2001b). The government recognized the potential risk that these activities might lead to students losing interest and motivation to learn English. Their main concern centered around the adoption of the traditional grammar-translation style of instruction in elementary school English lessons, which had long been prevalent in junior and senior high schools.

In the 2010s, foreign language activities were introduced as a response to observed differences in lesson content, teaching methods, and learning outcomes. In order to standardize lesson objectives and content, foreign language activities were incorporated as a mandatory component (designated as an “area of study” called “*ryoiki*”) for Grades 5 and 6, with government-endorsed learning materials. These changes were implemented to establish clearer educational goals, with a specific emphasis on enhancing students’ understanding of language and culture through English learning. The expectation was to foster a positive attitude toward cross-cultural understanding, encourage students to communicate in English, and build the foundation of communicative competence. This was to be accomplished by acquainting students

with the language's phonological and phonetic system and commonly used daily expressions (MEXT, 2008).

In the academic year 2020, English language education became a compulsory curriculum subject for Grades 5 and 6, and foreign language activities were introduced for Grades 3 and 4. A significant change accompanying this transition from an “area of study” to a curriculum subject involves the obligatory use of government-approved textbooks and the implementation of evaluation and grading procedures. The use of standardized textbooks has yielded positive outcomes by enhancing teachers' awareness of skill-based instruction goals (e.g., Can-Do lists of specific skill descriptors found in nearly all government-authorized textbooks) and by unifying lesson goals, content, and in-class communicative activities (Benesse, 2020; JES 20th, 2020).

Nevertheless, there remain critical issues and challenges to address. One of the foremost challenges is to establish effective teaching and evaluation methods that align with the developmental stages of students' literacy skills (MEXT, 2014). Due to delays and shortcomings in teacher preparation and training (MEXT, 2014), English lessons have been primarily conducted by in-service teachers who heavily rely on their intuition and government-authorized textbooks (see Nagamine, 2017). Furthermore, top-down government-led education reforms may have constrained teachers' creative and innovative teaching approaches (Day & Lee, 2011; Fullan, 2015; Martínez Agudo, 2018; Reio, 2011), which, in turn, hindered the development of both individual teacher self-efficacy and collective teacher self-efficacy within school settings (Leithwood & Beatty, 2008). To ensure a seamless and effective coordination across all levels of English education (elementary, junior high, and senior high school), there is an urgent need to empower teachers who can actively lead curriculum management (Nagamine, 2023). This paper concentrates on the literacy development of students in the realm of elementary school English education and discusses pertinent issues and challenges related to curriculum management.

### ***The Course of Study and Restrictions Imposed on Literacy Instruction***

As we can see in the recently revised *Course of Study* (MEXT, 2017), oracy-oriented teaching is considered ideal, emphasizing students' familiarization with frequently used vocabulary and useful expressions. Hence, English lessons related to literacy development for Grades 5 and 6 have some restrictions. Concerning writing skills, the main goal of instruction is to develop students' skills to scan and extract certain vocabulary, phrases, and sentences from learning materials and transcribe them accurately. Free writing exercises are not mandatory and should not be forced on students who are not ready. Regarding reading skills, the primary objective of instruction is to develop students' ability to grasp the general meaning of short sentences. Word-for-word translation (i.e., direct translation from English into Japanese and vice versa) must be avoided. The imposition of these restrictions is rooted in the government's

intention that the lesson content, instructional procedures, and teaching and evaluation methods would be carefully examined in local school settings in consideration of students' gradual development of literacy skills.

However, most elementary school teachers have a limited understanding of the meaning behind these restrictions and why they are imposed on literacy instruction. According to MEXT (2014), one of the contributing factors to this issue in local school settings is the delay in teacher preparation and training. MEXT emphasized the urgent need to equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge and to provide training for in-service teachers to change the current situation. It is worth noting that this problem is not unique to elementary school teachers; many junior and senior high school teachers also lack awareness of these restrictions. This problematic situation can be partly attributed to the absence of coursework in English phonetics and phonology in most English teacher education programs (Ito, 2017; Tani, 2005), as well as a lack of collaborative relationships among teachers across different school levels. Furthermore, the majority of in-service teachers never experienced English education at the elementary school level as students. Their lack of firsthand experience, coupled with a shortage of professional knowledge in early English education, places them in a challenging position. They primarily rely on government-authorized textbooks and their intuition, developed through grammar-centered English lessons during their own junior and senior high school years. The significant underlying issue here revolves around the oversight or neglect of a crucial concept: phonological and phonemic awareness. Developing this awareness is essential for nurturing students' literacy skills.

## **A Disparity between Different Types of Schools**

Reading and writing skills are interrelated, and the development process of both skills entails meaning-making process from texts. Thus, it can be said that “[d]eveloping literacy skills in a foreign language can begin as early as foreign language instruction begins” (Shin, 2017, p. 1). However, contextual factors should be taken into account. Particularly in Japan, inadequate implementation of literacy instruction conducted in tandem with explicit grammar-based instructions has been regarded as one of the major factors lowering students' motivation to learn English. The decision of MEXT to impose restrictions on literacy instruction may rekindle debates arguing for the avoidance of literacy instruction. The following remark of Olagboyega (2012) is pivotal in this regard:

... in fact neglecting reading and writing skills could cause greater motivational problems in the long run and create problems with students' language development, creating yet a bigger discrepancy between the elementary and junior high curriculums. ... [T]he motivational problems that Japanese students experience in learning English in school are related to teaching method and the level of language difficulty rather than to the language

skills in question. (p.23)

The important point is not to avoid literacy instruction but rather to consider and implement a systematic long-term instructional plan aligned with students' gradual development of literacy skills covering all periods of learning at elementary, junior high, and senior high schools.

In this sense, teacher collaboration for effective curriculum management is essential not only within one school type but across different types of schools (MEXT, 2015), and it may be advisable for MEXT and prefectural boards of education to consider creating an experienced teacher's position specialized in guiding, supporting, monitoring, and assessing continuous curriculum management across all school levels. The recently revised senior high school curriculum, for instance, a newly established English language subject "Logic and Expression," requires students to engage in "reading to learn" and "writing to learn" with the English language (as opposed to "learning to read" and "learning to write"). Such highly demanding tasks for which students need to use cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) can be effective only if the students appropriately develop their basic literacy skills and basic interpersonal communicative skills (BICS) (i.e., basic oracy skills) beforehand. This is the reason why there should be an emphasis on inductive and implicit oracy-oriented instruction to facilitate the development of BICS in both elementary school and the early stage of junior high school English education (Itagaki & Suzuki, 2011).

### **Teacher Collaboration and Curriculum Management**

In order to provide effective literacy instruction in the context of oracy-oriented teaching, teachers are required to collaborate with each other across all school levels. The focal point of teacher collaboration should be centered around systematic curriculum management (MEXT, 2015). To illustrate the necessity of such collaboration, let us discuss a key concept of phonological and phonemic awareness as an example.

Young learners, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, tend to rely heavily on the perceptions of syllables and onset-rime segments and segmental features (i.e., vowels and consonants) and sound-letter correspondences at the early stage of learning (Barnitz, 1985; Moats, 2020). Thus, an instructional approach in which "learning to read" precedes "learning to write" can be considered valid (cf. Lamb, 2014). In the initial stage of learning to read, phonological and phonemic awareness plays a crucial role (August & Shanahan, 2007; Kilpatrick, 2015).

According to Cunningham and Zibulsky (2014), phonological awareness can be defined as "the ability to perceive and manipulate sounds. [It] includes four levels of sound: word awareness, syllable awareness, onset-rime awareness, and phoneme awareness" (p.446). Word awareness includes the understanding of rhyming words, alliteration, and sentence segmentation, while syllable awareness the understanding of syllable segmentation within a word. Hence,

phonological awareness is an umbrella term encompassing the awareness of phonemes, which are the smallest units of linguistic sound capable of altering word meaning when substituted with another phoneme (e.g., /p/ in “pen” vs. /t/ in “ten”). Phonemic awareness is the understanding that a word, represented as a sequence of letters, can be phonetically dissected and identified as a sequence of phonemes. With this awareness, individuals gain the capability to proficiently manipulate linguistic sounds and create new words (Moats, 2020).

Previous research indicates that the emergence of phonological awareness typically precedes the development of phonemic awareness (Chard & Dickson, 1999). Of the four aforementioned types of awareness, scholars widely acknowledge that phonemic awareness presents the greatest complexity and challenge for both English learners and native English-speaking children (Chard & Dickson, 1999; Moats, 2020; Wasserstein & Lipka, 2019; Ziegler & Goswami, 2005). Moreover, phonemic awareness is also recognized as “one of the strongest predictors of subsequent reading achievement” (Brady, 2012, p. 19; see also Ehri et al., 2001). This assertion remains valid even for English learners, such as speakers of Chinese or Japanese, whose native languages are nonalphabetic (Li et al., 2018).

Even during silent reading, students, particularly those with lower proficiency levels, tend to engage in subconscious inner vocalization of texts, a process also known as subvocalization or auditory assurance (Perrone-Bertolotti et al., 2012; Yao et al., 2011). When phonemic awareness is inadequately developed, students reading English texts must allocate time and effort to phonemic processing, in addition to inner vocalization at the word and sentence levels. The greater the time and effort expended on phonemic processing, the more time is needed for comprehension, which significantly hinders the overall understanding of English texts. Phonological and phonemic recognition constitute fundamental elements of skills-based reading, representing the essential prerequisites for students to proceed to content-based reading and achieve a deeper text comprehension. Content-based reading demands the utilization of advanced cognitive abilities, including the activation of background knowledge (i.e., schemata), the capacity to grasp nuanced meanings of vocabulary and phrases within a given context, and the ability to infer meaning beyond the literal text. Most students who struggle with reading comprehension often encounter difficulties in skills-based reading before venturing into cognitively demanding, content-based reading. Therefore, the development of phonemic awareness is regarded as a critical and indispensable factor, not only in improving the quality of reading but also in advancing reading fluency (Kilpatrick, 2015).

Previous research also indicates that English learners’ phonemic awareness and phonemic processing strategies are affected by developmental constraints and differences of first language writing systems (e.g., Ziegler & Goswami, 2005; Ziegler et al., 2010). It is also reported that English learners’ relative level of bilingualism and the type of reading instruction they experienced are influential factors determining the development and activation process of phonological awareness and word decoding skills (Bialystok et al., 2005). It is interesting to

note that English learners' experience of receiving inadequate first language (L1) reading instruction and their difficulties in L1 reading tasks negatively impact the development of phonemic awareness of the target language (Li et al., 2018).

The research findings and pedagogical implications discussed here may not necessarily be knowledge that elementary school teachers need to possess. Demanding the teachers to acquire such knowledge could potentially lead to a decline in the willingness and motivation to teach English lessons. Since these findings are the results of research activities conducted by experts in the field, it may be necessary for in-service teachers and researchers to engage in collaborative efforts to deliberate on what instructional approaches can be practiced in local school settings. At least with regard to phonological and phonemic awareness, effective instructional strategies, techniques, and tasks have been explored and clarified, and even standardized. Methods for assessing/evaluating students' learning outcomes have also been established.

While it is certain that the development of phonological and phonemic awareness plays a crucial role in students' literacy development, it is important to confirm the underlying premise here. The development of phonological and phonemic awareness is preceded by the acquisition of pronunciation and articulation skills, or at least to say, the development of awareness regarding how to produce language sounds. Without a fundamental understanding of the place and manner of articulation and the basic skills to articulate language sounds, there is a risk of delayed development in phonological and phonemic awareness. Therefore, it is worth noting the importance of instruction in the articulation of individual English alphabet letters, word articulation, and pronunciation at the phrase and sentence levels.

Overall, there is considerable value in integrating phonological and phonemic awareness into school curricula at all levels, as well as in teacher education programs and professional development opportunities for in-service teachers. In the currently available government-authorized textbooks, there are exercises designed to enhance students' phonological and phonemic awareness. However, these exercises are often either overlooked, used without teachers' (hence, students') understanding of the purpose, or not linked to the evaluation of students' learning outcomes. We have discussed only the pivotal concept of phonological and phonemic awareness, but it has become evident that teachers can take various aspects of literacy instruction into account. Solely relying on government-authorized textbooks and delivering instruction based entirely on the content does not suffice to achieve the curriculum management required today (MEXT, 2015). Teachers at all school levels should actively participate in discussions regarding "when" and "how" to teach and evaluate "what," developing their own curricula, and assessing their efficacy and feasibility. This process should be undertaken with the active involvement of teachers themselves, and they should seek collaboration with researchers and scholars in the field as needed.

## Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the top-down government-led reforms in elementary school English education, the restrictions observed in *The Course of Study* pertaining to literacy instruction, and the disparity caused by inadequate literacy instruction between elementary and junior high schools. Our argument centered on the importance of not neglecting literacy instruction in elementary school English education; what we need is systematic structured planning and effective coordination of lesson objectives, content, and evaluation methods through cross-school curriculum management. We further asserted that cross-school curriculum management necessitates collaborative efforts among teachers. One potential approach to facilitate such curriculum management is to create a position for an experienced teacher specialized in guiding, supporting, monitoring, and evaluating continuous curriculum management. Teacher collaboration is the key to the successful implementation of any education reforms.

Finally, the authors have established a research team to investigate the self-efficacy beliefs of elementary school English teachers at Myojyo Elementary School, a private elementary school in Oita prefecture. The primary focus is on teachers' self-efficacy beliefs, but our research also explores their decision-making and actions as they relate to curriculum management. In addition, our roles include not only observing English lessons and collecting data for research purposes but also supporting and guiding teachers for their professional development.

At Myojyo Elementary School, although government-authorized textbooks are distributed to students, alternative learning materials specifically designed for young English as a second language (ESL) learners have been used as the primary instructional materials for an extended period. This does not imply a complete disregard for government-approved textbooks; most of their content has been covered in English lessons. In other words, English teachers at Myojyo Elementary School have not solely relied on the content of government-authorized textbooks. Therefore, their curriculum management and decision-making processes likely differ significantly from those at other public elementary schools. Because our research is still ongoing, details of the research are not provided at this point. However, there is a strong possibility that our research will offer valuable insights to in-service teachers, teacher educators, and researchers aiming to concretize effective curriculum management, as well as the ideal form of collaboration among teachers and researchers.

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