

Chapter 9

Japanese-Language Education at Junior High School: Post-*yutori*, the PISA Shock, and the Abe Administrations



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Abstract This chapter discusses the development of Japanese-language education in Japan over the preceding decades and under the second Abe administration, paying special attention to the 2017 revision of the junior high course of study for Japanese-language education. The primary source material used includes the relevant courses of study as well as a selection of MEXT-approved junior high textbooks. I identify three major flows that coalesced in changes that can be observed in the revised course of study as well as in school textbooks published throughout the last few years. Firstly, whilst the revision in many ways was intended as a reversal of the earlier *yutori*-style approaches, many of these aspects remain intact. Secondly, the so-called PISA shock motivated MEXT to stress the need for technical mastery of language and the pursuit of better functional reading literacy according to the PISA model. Thirdly, the reform drive of the second Abe administration motivated a greater emphasis on traditional language culture and classic literary works. Although the Japanese-language textbooks now in use may not have been approved based on criteria from the newest course of study revision, it is evident that they pre-empt and reflect similar policy intentions. The chapter concludes with some comments on both the value and the limitations of studies of the course of study and of coursebook materials.

Keyword Japanese-language education · Course of study · Academic ability · *Yutori* education · PISA · Policy reform

This chapter discusses the development of Japanese-language education in Japan over the preceding decades and under the second Abe administration. To this end, I pay attention to the courses of study (COS) as guidelines for curriculum and lesson design issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), and to textbooks, since they both reflect the government and ministry's

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policy intentions and directly inform schools and teachers of what is expected of them. The textbook approval system is briefly outlined in Chap. 6. My focus in this chapter is on the junior high curriculum since that is an age group especially relevant for PISA, which I argue had a considerable impact on the 2017 COS revision.

I will start by considering the background and likely influences that shaped the most recent COS revisions. I identify three significant influences, namely the introduction of solid academic ability, the PISA shock, and the Abe administration's reform drive. After that, I go through the latest COS revision from 2017 to investigate what traces there are of these aforementioned influences. I consider the PISA shock an especially significant influence for Japanese-language education. Next, I examine a selection of MEXT-authorized junior high textbooks as a case study to explore in what ways the COS revision may be implemented in the classrooms. The summary of the finding is followed by a few concluding remarks.

9.1 Revising the Course of Study for Japanese-Language Education

The first COS was adopted in 1947 following the enactment of the Fundamental Law on Education (FLE; *kyōiku kihonhō*), which signalled the start of Japan's post-war education system. Since then, it has been revised roughly at ten-year intervals, the three most recent revisions taking place in 1998, 2008, and 2017. Since the early post-war period, a host of factors have influenced these revisions, ranging from political and economic causes to pedagogical influences from the USA and domestic concerns about scholastic achievement. This section will identify and discuss three influences that have likely played a key role in shaping the 2017 COS revision.

9.1.1 *Post-yutori and the Introduction of Solid Academic Ability*

The current developments in Japanese education policy cannot be understood without briefly revisiting what has come to be known as *yutori* education, which aims for a less pressured education with 'room to grow'. The 1990s saw the proposal of a 'new perspective on academic ability' that moved away from memorisation of facts and strictly technical learning to the cultivation of interest, motivation, and attitude. Thus, the role of the teacher was meant to shift from transmitting knowledge to helping students acquire knowledge by themselves (Yamamoto, 2017). This came to colour the 1998 revision of the COS in particular. An important change was the addition of 'Life Skills' (*seikatsu-ka*) as a primary-school subject, which was part of the work to enable students to live 'rich lives', but the overall revision was more significant as it decreased the total number of school hours and promoted teaching in line with

the new perspective on academic ability (MEXT, 1998a, 1998b). However, it did not take long before a new concept gained favour.

In 2003, the Central Council for Education, which is the foremost advisory body within MEXT, started discussing what it called ‘solid academic ability’ (*tashika na gakuryoku*), defined by MEXT as a broad range of competencies that includes not only basic knowledge and skills but also a desire for learning and the ability to think, decide, and express oneself (MEXT, 2005). This became the foundation for the 2008 and 2017 revisions of the COS.

Now, this development tends to be presented as part of the backlash against *yutori* education that mass media outlets unleashed in the 2000s. However, this is only half of the story. It would be unfair to consider the new concept a reversion to pre-*yutori* ideas since subsequent courses of study retained many of the central elements of the ‘new perspective on academic ability’. Rather than rolling things back, a core aim seems to have been to clarify the meaning and implications of the new perspective by identifying knowledge and skills as functional tools to be utilised rather than things to be possessed (Yamamoto, 2017). As we shall see, the 2008 and 2017 COS revisions also did not negate what came with the 1998 revision. Nonetheless, it did reintroduce more classroom hours, especially in subjects like Japanese, social studies, and mathematics (Tasaki, 2017). It attempted to balance the need for both individual inquisitiveness and the acquisition of basic knowledge. Of course, other additions were made as well for other reasons, which we shall return to, but at this point I just want to point out that the general thrust of the revisions that stemmed from the introduction of solid academic ability was not really a negation of what came before.

9.1.2 *The PISA Shock*

Somewhat separate yet simultaneously and very much intertwined with this movement towards ‘solid academic ability’, was another factor that influenced the most recent COS revisions to a significant degree. This was the so-called PISA shock, which is a label applied primarily to the reactions of politicians and media outlets in response to Japan’s apparent drop in PISA rankings in 2003.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide large-scale comparative education study conducted by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in many countries across the world. The first study was conducted in 2000 and it has been undertaken every three years since. The stated purpose is to measure the academic ability of 15-year-olds, which in Japan’s case means students in the third grade of junior high school, in mathematics, science, and reading. PISA has increasingly made efforts to measure students’ problem-solving ability, creativity, and other skills suitable for life in modern society, collectively referred to as ‘twenty-first century skills’. Since the publication of the first report in 2001, PISA has been the ‘global gold standard for education quality’ (Sjøberg, 2016: 3). As such, it has been a frequent topic in education policy debate across the world, and Japan has not been an exception.

Now, although I will not dwell on it here, I will just briefly mention that PISA is not without its detractors. Whilst its importance and influence with regards to national education policy across the world is undisputed, researchers and experts have long taken issue with aspects of the survey, or even its underlying philosophy and method. Famously, an open letter signed by nearly 100 education professionals was addressed to Andrea Schleicher, director of the OECD's Education and Skills Department in 2014. It criticises the OECD and PISA for having escalated the over-reliance on standardised testing and quantitative measurement, putting the focus on too narrow a range of educational metrics which consequently means that other aspects of schooling are ignored, and instigating excessive competitiveness between countries in ways that ultimately damage education (Andrews et al., 2014).

Now, as mentioned, the PISA shock was triggered by an apparent drop in Japan's PISA rankings. This happened in all categories, but for the purposes of this chapter, the most relevant drop was in reading. Japan ranked 8th (score 522) in 2000 but fell to 14th (score 498) in 2003 and then to 15th (score 498) in 2006.¹ The drop between 2000 and 2003 was the biggest amongst all participating countries for the same period and was quickly identified as a cause for alarm (Fuji, 2008). Japan was still above the OECD average but ended up far behind nearby Asian participants like South Korea and Hong Kong as well as some countries in Europe and Oceania.

To clarify, the OECD defines reading literacy in the PISA context as 'understanding, using, reflecting on, and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential, and participate in society' (Mo, 2019). This is a functional definition of literacy, described by Matsushita (2014) as 'a globally shared and imaginary functional literacy that disregards contents and knowledge related to political perspectives'. She argues that it is necessary for individual countries to restore these disregarded perspectives when devising educational approaches on the national level. This is concerned with all the ways students may be exposed to texts in their everyday lives and encourages them to engage with and make use of them to realise their own goals and aspirations. This broader understanding of literacy is something Japanese policymakers paid special attention to.

In December 2005, MEXT formulated what was termed the Programme for the Improvement of Reading Literacy (*Dokkairiyoku kōjō ni kansuru puroguramu*) (MEXT, 2006a), which became the start of a variety of measures that aimed to improve Japan's PISA ranking, including the rolling out of nationwide academic achievement testing.² MEXT made an effort to identify what was lacking in Japan's conventional literacy education and proposed that reading literacy, as envisioned by PISA, differed from how it had been defined in Japanese language education. They emphasised that this PISA-style reading literacy was not just about 'extracting information' but it also involved interpretation and deliberation. Likewise, it went

¹ Since then, Japan ranked 8th (score 520) in 2009, 4th (score 538) in 2012, 8th (score 516) in 2015, and 15th (score 504) in 2018.

² It is important to note here that MEXT did not simply react passively to the outrage and concern voiced in media outlets, but actively capitalised on this as a way to reassert its legitimacy as the country's central education agency, something that had been challenged and hollowed out through fiscal and structural reforms initiated by the Koizumi administration since 2001 (Takayama, 2008).

beyond just grasping texts to also thinking about how they can be used. The texts should not be considered just for their contents, but also for their structure, form, and expression. Finally, texts include not just conventional written work but also includes things like figures, graphs, and tables that mix words and visuals to varying degrees (MEXT, 2006a). MEXT speculated that any education reform would have to take into account this broader understanding of reading literacy if Japan was to improve in the PISA ranking.

An extension of this was the creation of the Meeting of Collaborators on Fostering Language Ability (*Gengoryoku ikusei kyōryokusha kaigi*) in June 2006. This committee, which consisted of numerous education experts and practitioners (university professors, research institute directors, school headmasters) and MEXT representatives, met on eight occasions in 2006–2007 to discuss various approaches to improve students' language abilities, ranging from initiatives to specifically improve 'PISA-type reading literacy' to more interdisciplinary approaches (MEXT, 2007). For example, the committee proposed:

From the viewpoint of fostering PISA-style reading literacy, as an example, it would be possible to change the emphasis between “extracting information”, “interpretation”, “deliberation” and “statement”, in reference to the objectives of the PISA survey; but the question is how to concretely improve the teaching contents for Japanese language.

It is clear from this passage and others that they perceived a need for enacting a teaching reform to improve Japan's international standing, thinking of PISA requirements as a reasonable standard by which to measure the performance of Japanese students.

Their insights were meant to be incorporated in the 2008 COS revision (Tanaka, 2013). In reality, however, the 2008 revision does not seem to reflect their conclusions fully. At the very least, no significant changes were made to the junior high Japanese-language course; most likely it was already too late for their incorporation into the 2008 COS, planning for which had already begun some years earlier. A similar observation can be made about other changes pursued by the first Abe administration.

9.1.3 Revisions Under the Abe Administration

Another aspect that should be taken into consideration for our discussion about the more recent COS revisions is the political desire that has existed on the side of the Abe administrations. Prime Minister Abe has been known for his intention to reinterpret Japan's Constitution, but his administrations were simultaneously engaged in other educational projects. Most notable for our purposes is the revision of the Fundamental Law on Education that was conducted by the first Abe administration in December 2006. This was the first time that the law was revised since its initial ascent in 1947, so it was largely motivated by the need to update its contents to suit more recent developments and challenges in Japanese and international society,

ranging from population ageing to globalisation and technological advances. It introduced general references to the importance of communal spirit, rich humanity and creativity, tradition, and future-orientation. It also included new paragraphs about lifelong learning, provisions for students with disabilities, equal treatment of all students, and other aspects that reflect values and practices today (MEXT, 2006b). It is very likely that the administration had hopes for this revision to be translated into more concrete education policy measures from the outset, but this work was interrupted when Prime Minister Abe Shinzō resigned in September 2007. Nonetheless, the new FLE makes up part of the background of the drive to revise the COS.

Seen from this perspective, we should identify this more general concern about preparing Japanese students for the future globalised and technologically advanced knowledge economy as a third driving force for the most recent COS revisions. To this, we can also add a parallel nationalist and conservative motivation, which is evident in the new FLE's emphasis on tradition, for example. The political game and the processes by which political intentions are translated into education policy are summarised in Chap. 2. As such, there are changes with regards to Japanese-language education and otherwise that do not directly stem from either the introduction of solid academic ability or the PISA shock. However, it is important to emphasise that these changes in Japanese-language education emerged not in the 2008 course of study immediately after the revision of the FLE. There were few material changes between the 1998 and 2008 courses for Japanese-language. The debate in Japanese-language filtered into the regular curriculum cycle and emerged in the 2017 course of study (Yakura, 2017).

To conclude this section, we have discussed three important developments that culminated in the 2008 and 2017 COS revisions. These were the introduction of solid academic ability in the post-*yutori* period, the PISA shock, and the Abe administration's drive for revision. It goes without saying that these were not discrete influences but that they were intimately intertwined and interacted continually. They were part of a greater general flow or social mood that forced education policy to enter a post-*yutori* phase, although those ideas were not substantially discarded, as we have seen. Having established this, the following section examines whether these policy intentions of the many actors described above can be found in the current (2017) COS.

9.2 The 2017 Course of Study

In this section, I will examine the differences between the 1998/2008 and 2017 editions of the junior high COS in some detail. I will treat the 1998 and 2008 editions as the same for the most part since no significant changes were introduced in the junior high Japanese-language chapter.

9.2.1 *First Grade*

The first major change that we should note is the new teaching objectives for year 1. The 1998 and 2008 editions set the objective as:

Enhancing the students' ability to value their own ideas as well as speak and listen accurately in accordance with their aims and the situation, as well as nurturing an attitude of valuing the spoken language. (MEXT, 1998b, 2008)

This was replaced with the following in 2017:

Equipping students with the ability to speak about topics that relate to everyday life whilst considering how to organise the composition, the ability to listen whilst considering the speaker's intentions, and the ability to talk together with others whilst grasping the topic and direction, so as to suit their aims and the situation, as well as nurturing an attitude of organising thoughts by speaking and listening. (MEXT, 2017a)

We may notice the inclusion of 'everyday life' as a key reference point. This is a wording that can be seen throughout the document and suggests a shift to increased 'functional literacy'. Likewise, whilst the previous first grade objective emphasised that students should 'value their own ideas', the new one encourages them to consider the intentions of their interlocutor and the direction of the conversation. This raises the bar for interpretive ability by asking the students to think actively about the overall structure and flow of a conversation.

Several items have been added to the contents that the teacher is supposed to teach their students. Again, the course of study says that the students should be able to speak about topics from everyday life. It is also expected that they can adjust the speed, volume, and style of speaking to ensure that the other person understands and so that it suits the situation. An item has also been added to encourage students to ask questions and consider other people's opinions that accord or differ with their own. On the other hand, some content items are removed. The earlier edition said that students should be taught to pick topics that are suitable for them to express their own ideas and feelings accurately, but this is absent from the later edition.

A completely new section has also been added immediately after the speaking and listening portion. It lists suggestions for language activities that can be used to practice the learning objectives. A list like this has been added to all the sections, meaning speaking and listening, writing, and reading, and for all grades. In this case, the suggested activities encourage engagement with everyday topics through reports, presentations, conversations, and debates. The earlier editions did have some suggested activities towards the end, for example listing a couple of activities that could be used to teach speaking and listening in general (all grades), but the new edition is more specific and makes suggestions for all grades.

As regards writing, reference has been added to topics from everyday life. An item has also been added about categorising and organising materials as well as considering the role of paragraphs when writing text. A small addition has also been made about considering how clear the grounds for an argument are when reading texts that you have written to each other. Similar to the previous section, an item about

selecting appropriate materials to accurately express your own ideas and feelings has been deleted. The suggested activities include writing about an artwork that the student enjoyed, using figures and tables to explain something in writing, and presenting an event.

Comparatively, with regards to reading, students are to be taught to pay extra attention to how story developments and characters are depicted as a conduit to better understand the contents. Students should also think independently about the composition and development of texts as well as what characterises the expressions. The earlier edition also mentioned taking note of the development of the text but was less specific. Likewise, the earlier edition has an item about collecting required information from a text, but the new edition adds that it should be done to suit the specific goal at hand. The suggested activities include reading different types of texts aloud, reading texts whilst considering the relationship between text, figures, and tables, and presenting a recently read book whilst citing its content appropriately.

Next comes a section titled ‘Matters relating to traditional language culture and the special qualities of the Japanese language’. It corresponds to the section ‘language matters’ in the earlier COS. I will return to this later when more relevant, so for now I simply note that this subheading appears for all grades. It also includes some information about the *kanji* that the students are expected to learn. Generally, the new COS prescribes a higher number of characters than previously.

9.2.2 *Second Grade*

A rather significant change arises in the fact that the part previously covering grades 2 and 3 has been divided into two parts, one covering each grade. This seems to follow a more general trend of clarifying details of the COS specifically. Grades 2 and 3 have in common that they build on the focus on everyday life in grade one to be more concerned with what is termed ‘life in society’, but the new edition also specifies what progression is expected.

The overall objectives for grade 2 refer to life in society in the same way that the grade 1 objectives talked about everyday life. The new edition introduces explicit mention of the importance of taking into consideration differences in position and ideas when speaking to others as well as of respecting the other person. It also specifies that students should be taught to adapt their writing to suit the situation and make it easy for others to read. They should also pay special attention to the content and ways of expressing emotions in texts. There are no notable deletions from the earlier editions, but certain elements are only included in one of the grades but not the other.

With respect to speaking and listening, students are encouraged to find topics from life in society. An interesting addition is that students should organise their thoughts whilst anticipating that others may be in different situations or have different ideas. The suggested activities include presenting findings from an investigation and debating topics from societal living.

On the subject of writing, a line has been added about choosing topics from life in society. The new edition also elaborates on an item about effectively conveying information (facts, opinions, sentiments) by adding the use of concrete examples and depictions adapted to the situation where the earlier edition had made more vague reference to reasoning and logical development. It also says that students should aspire to write texts that are easy to read and understand. The suggested activities include writing poems and stories, arguing certain standpoints about debatable topics in writing, and writing letters needed for life in society.

As regards reading, the items have been changed quite substantially, even when accounting for how the earlier edition covered both grades 2 and 3. The direction has not changed, but the new items are more specific. Students should be taught to pay extra attention to words and phrases that express abstract concepts or sentiments and should consider the overall structure of texts; the effects of different elements, such as examples and depictions; and the meaning of characters' actions in works of fiction to better understand the contents. They should also associate what they read with their own knowledge and experiences to allow them to form their own individual opinions. Something that has disappeared are two mentions of using things previously read to develop the student's own way of using words. The suggested activities include sharing impressions of poems and stories with others, presenting your own ideas about the contents and expressions of explanatory or critical texts, and comparing information gained from different sources like newspapers, the internet, and the school library.

9.2.3 *Third Grade*

The objectives for grade 3 require more interactivity from the students. They are expected to gain skills for solving problems with others by talking and a desire to deepen their own thoughts by talking and listening. They should also learn to read more critically by evaluating how a text develops or the expressions that are used. Moreover, the teacher should foster a desire to improve themselves through reading. The last point also existed in the earlier edition, but it only applies to grade 3 in the new one.

As regards speaking and listening, the teacher is asked to teach the students to speak persuasively on topics from life in society whilst organising their thoughts based on previous experiences and knowledge, using grammar effectively, and using materials. Something that was not part of the earlier editions is the suggestion that students should be able to adapt their way of speaking to steer conversations effectively as well as make good use of both their own ideas and those of interlocutors in problem-solving. The suggested activities include giving speeches according to the time and place, then giving their opinion on a topic of social life with the intention of persuading another person.

With respect to writing, it is not so different from grade 2 although the students are now supposed to write persuasive texts rather than just easy-to-understand texts.

Also, unlike earlier editions, words to the effect of ‘evaluate’ and ‘assess’ are used to indicate that students should reflect more about how arguments are developed and expressions are used for effect. The suggested activities include writing a critical text about something you are interested in and editing several texts that you have gathered for a certain purpose.

As regards reading, there is also added emphasis on teaching the students to compare different texts in an effort to evaluate composition, development, and expression. The suggested activities include reading and criticising stories, reading, and comparing information to be found in things like editorials and news reports, and reflecting on how you have been choosing books and reading in your own life as a reader.

9.2.4 *Other Points of Note*

The sections outlined above are followed, in both the old and new courses of study, by a few sections discussing the organisation of the teaching plan and use of teaching materials. Many parts have not been changed significantly. Though the section appears shorter in the new edition at first glance, numerous parts have simply been moved into other sections. Nonetheless, the new edition exhibits some important changes, such as a higher number of hours recommended to teach the subject. As I mentioned previously, this is a general trend in the 2017 COS in multiple subjects and signifies a move away from the attempt to reduce the number of classroom hours that was a prominent feature of the *yutori* period. We may also note the new status of ‘moral education’ (*dōtoku kyōiku*) as a formal subject, which is relevant here since the new edition asks the teacher to consider connections between the two subjects and to adapt their teaching in accordance with the special features of Japanese-language teaching. The section about teaching materials is largely intact, but two new items can be found. One asks the teacher to introduce students to representative works of modern literature so that they might be familiarised with Japanese literary culture. The other asks them to include the original text, a modern translation, and commentary when using teaching classics.

I noted above the renaming of the subheading ‘Language matters’ to ‘Matters regarding traditional language culture and the special qualities of the Japanese language’. This does not so much add content but rather ties together certain elements that were more disconnected in the earlier COS editions. It emphasises exposing the students to classical works of literature and fostering an understanding of their themes, characters, and style. More than in the earlier editions, teachers are asked to stimulate students’ interest in such works and increase their understanding of past literary conventions and their historical background. This may perhaps be interpreted as an expression of the Abe brand of nationalism, but that question goes beyond the scope of this chapter.

To conclude this section, I want to note that the various examples discussed reveal rather substantive changes that have been made to the COS in some instances. Overall,

the objectives and contents prescribed have become more specific and more technical. There is added emphasis on understanding how the structure of speech and writing changes the message. Students are to be taught how to adapt their language to achieve specific aims and to take into consideration all aspects of a text when interpreting it. Importantly, this is clearly not a reversion to an earlier time of memorisation and formal knowledge, but the addition of a more technical dimension to the *yutori*-era ‘new perspective on academic ability’ approach of the student formulating their own opinions on all kinds of topics. That is, it is characterised by the syncretic nature of solid academic ability that seeks to combine *yutori* ideas with the acquisition of basic knowledge and techniques. Moreover, it emphasises the need to understand that multiple perspectives are possible and that language needs to be adjusted to communicate effectively when there are differences in opinion. It is evident that this draws on the work of the Meeting of Collaborators on Fostering Language Ability as the document espouses a type of functional literacy that is for using texts to achieve specific goals and living a good life in society, which we previously termed ‘PISA-type reading literacy’. Finally, I also noted that there is a stronger focus on Japanese traditional language culture and classic literary works, which hints at a lineage straight from the revised FLE, finally realised under the auspices of the second Abe administration.

9.3 Implications in Teaching and Textbooks

Having looked at the various changes introduced in the 2017 COS revision; we should ask ourselves how this affects teaching in the classroom. As a window into this debate, I will introduce the findings of a small case study in which I compared a small number of Japanese-language textbooks that are either currently in use or were previously used.

I limited my inquiry to textbooks published by Mitsumura Tosho, one of Japan’s leading publishers of school textbooks, with a large number of school districts in the Tokyo area and elsewhere using their books in teaching. As we shall see, they are very sensitive to changes in national education policy and their website contains a wealth of reference materials for teachers and schools to help them accommodate current and future policy demands.

Now, the 2017 COS was scheduled for full implementation at junior high school in 2021, with 2018–2020 designated a transition period for the junior high curriculum. Meanwhile, the Mitsumura junior high Japanese-language textbooks currently in use were approved in 2015, for use in schools from the following year onward.³ Thus, they do not reflect the 2017 COS revision but rather the 2008 revision, which we

³ Japanese elementary and junior high schools are required to only use textbooks that have been authorised by MEXT. Exceptions can be made in special situations, but schools generally choose textbooks from a pool of authorised books that is updated by the major textbook publishers every few years. The authorisation is to ensure that the books fulfil the requirements set forth in the COS and other relevant regulations.

have already concluded were not substantially altered from the course of study before that. Nonetheless, a look at some of the textbooks do suggest that a shift had already begun in anticipation of the then-forthcoming revisions, in reference to preparatory discussions. I believe the organisation of the latest (2016) textbooks corroborates the findings in the previous section.

I wish to start by comparing the Mitsumura Japanese-language textbooks for junior high school 2nd grade as they reveal some hints of the developments previously discussed. The books were published in 1997, 2012, and 2016.⁴ They have many similarities in terms of themes and topics as they include texts meant to encourage the students to think about the richness of language, their own culture, and their connections with others.

Each textbook was approved the previous year and used from the school year beginning in its year of publication. It consists of seven chapters: (1) ‘With a Fresh State of Mind’ (*shinsen na kimochi de*), (2) ‘The Richness of Expression’ (*hyōgen no yutakasa*), (3) ‘Our Culture’ (*watashitachi no bunka*), (4) ‘Grasping Bonds of the Heart’ (*kokoro no kizuna o toraeru*), (5) ‘Learning from Culture’ (*bunka ni manabu*), (6) ‘Getting Familiar with the Classics’ (*koten ni shitashimu*), and (7) ‘What It Means to Live’ (*ikiru koto wa*). The book mixes prose and poetry with commentary on grammar and Chinese characters.

The two other books are fairly similar to each other but also have important differences. The 2012 textbook also consists of seven chapters: (1) ‘Broadening Learning’ (*hirogaru manabi e*), (2) ‘Taking a Point of View’ (*shiten o sadamete*), (3) ‘Reading and Information: Imparting a Technique’ (*dokusho to jōhō: waza o tsutaeru*), (4) ‘Reading Bonds’ (*kizuna o yomu*), (5) ‘Visiting the Minds of Old’ (*inishie no kokoro o tazuneru*), (6) ‘Grasping Logic’ (*ronri o toraeru*), and (7) ‘Gazing at Oneself’ (*jibun o mitsumeru*). The current 2016 textbook consists of the following seven chapters: (1) ‘Toward Broadening Learning’ (*hirogaru manabi e*), (2) ‘From Multiple Perspectives’ (*tayō na shiten kara*), (3) ‘Facing the Words’ (*kotoba to mukiau*), (4) ‘Relating to Others’ (*kakawari no naka de*), (5) ‘Visiting the Minds of Old’ (*inishie no kokoro o tazuneru*), (6) ‘Grasping Logic’ (*ronri o toraeru*), and (7) ‘Watching Expressions’ (*hyōgen o mitsumete*).

It is not difficult to find correspondences between the three books. All of them have a chapter on relating to others and considering the minds of people of the past, for example. However, we should also note that the 1997 textbook dedicates a chapter to the question of ‘what it means to live’. This chapter contains one story about how a song inspires different emotions in different people because of their life experiences (Oh Pattering Rain; *Parapara ochiru ame yo*) and one poem about a man on an evening train who is reminded of a life lesson when observing a fellow passenger (Afterglow; *Yūyake*). The book explains that the main learning objective of the chapter is to have students deepen their own thinking and to think about how

⁴ The 1997 textbook was used in schools 1997–2002. The 2012 textbook was used in schools 2012–2016. The 2016 textbook was used in schools 2016–2021. Between 2002 and 2012 there were two intervening editions which are not discussed here. The new edition for 2021 onward has recently been approved, but is not discussed here.

people live their lives. In other words, it is about learning how to express feelings and thoughts to others.

By contrast, the chapters unique to the latter two books are of a different character. For example, the 2016 book has a chapter titled ‘Reading and Information: Imparting a Technique’. It contains four short texts: ‘In Order to Get along Well with the Media’ (*media to jōzu ni tsukiau tame ni*) by popular TV news educator Ikegami Akira, ‘Looking up “that Person” Who You Are Curious about’ (*ki ni naru ‘ano hito’ o sagurō*), ‘The Travelling Painter: A Letter from Paris’ (*tabi suru ekaki: Pari kara no tegami*), and ‘Why Doesn’t the Five-Story Pagoda Collapse?’ (*gojū no tō wa naze taorenai ka*). The stated primary aim of the chapter is to help students think about the features of online and media sources as well as approaches to look up and find information from such sources. That is, the chapter is concerned with practical skills for information gathering in the modern age.

Likewise, the 2016 textbook has a chapter titled ‘Watching Expressions’ that includes a longer text by famous author Dazai Osamu (‘Run, Melos!’; *Hashire Merosu*), a shorter text titled ‘Science Is Within You’ (*Kagaku wa anata no naka ni*), and a poem titled ‘Key’ (*Kagi*). There is also an extensive section about how to adapt your expression when writing a narrative to effectively communicate the setting and feelings of characters. As indicated by the chapter title, the focus of this chapter is how literary expression is varied and employed variously to get different effects. It discusses the many aspects that influence how a text is interpreted, going beyond the simple communication of facts or basic information.

All in all, although we should be careful not to exaggerate the differences between these books, the overall impression is that the 1997 textbook encourages students to reflect more on various life topics and global affairs. The latter two talk much more about effective composition, logical argumentation, and the employment of multiple perspectives, encouraging the students to actively think about how to devise sentences and texts for specific purposes. Although there is no drastic shift in this period, there seems to have been a movement away from *yutori*-style contemplativeness to more instrumental and technical use of language. Moreover, since the changes we see here in many ways mirror the changes we saw introduced in the 2017 COS revision, it also indicates that COS revisions are not necessary for changes in teaching practices since policy intentions can be communicated in many ways even before they are formalised in the COS and other documents.

To further emphasise the last point, as well as to give an idea of how the textbook material can be pre-emptively adapted for use in the classroom, I want to briefly discuss the special guidance issued by MEXT in June 2017. The special guidance was created to instruct teachers and schools about considerations to be made in teaching for the sake of ensuring a smoother transition to when the new COS is implemented (MEXT, 2017b). The main contents of the guidance are the inclusion of new Chinese characters, especially those used in the names of the Japanese prefectures. However, aside from this concrete guidance, MEXT also encourages schools to ‘actively facilitate the initiatives in the new course of study’.

Textbook publishers can incorporate new policy directions ahead of time and, in this case, it would appear that textbook publishers stand at the forefront of anticipatory

adaptation. Mitsumura Toshio issued their own guidance material to help teachers adjust their teaching to the new guidelines when using the Mitsumura textbooks (Mitsumura, 2017), without changing the contents of said textbook. For example, the guidance materials from Mitsumura cites the revised COS's emphasis on student understanding of the various ways that relationships between pieces of information can be expressed and lists the parts of the textbooks that are most relevant and where such lessons can be taught. It also supplies a revised teaching plan for the year with suggested exercises to achieve the new teaching objectives, again, without altering the content of the approved textbook.

9.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have briefly examined the background and contents of the most recent COS revision that took place in 2017, studying the case of junior high Japanese-language education. We identified three major flows that coalesced in the changes we observed in the revised COS as well as in school textbooks published in the last few years. Firstly, this revision followed one of the major trajectories of Japanese education policy in the twenty-first century, namely the trend usually termed 'the reverse course on *yutori* education'. We noted, however, that this was not so much a departure as an amendment. Many elements that we associate with *yutori* and the new perspective on academic ability are very much present in the revised COS still, although they have been tempered by various additions.

This takes us to the second influence, which was the so-called PISA shock, which I consider the foremost influence on the changes for Japanese-language education in the COS revision. In parallel with the general post-*yutori* trend, this motivated MEXT to stress the need for technical mastery of language and the pursuit of better functional reading literacy according to the PISA model. This means that teachers are instructed to foster students' ability to engage with texts in diverse ways by going beyond the simple extraction of information and into interpretation and deliberation on overall structure, use of expressions, and phrasing to gain a more nuanced understanding of the text. Such considerations are emphasised in all aspects of language usage: speaking, listening, writing, and reading.

Finally, although this is not a core concern of this study, we also saw the influence of the Abe administration's culturally conservative reform drive that was primarily symbolised by the 2006 FLE revision. The 2017 COS revision has a greater focus on familiarising students with traditional language culture and classic literary works as well as encouraging them to understand the mindsets and expressions of the people of the past.

Although the Japanese-language textbooks in use now were not approved based on criteria from the newest COS revision, it is evident that they reflect similar policy intentions, which have been present in educational politics since at least 2006. The textbooks now include more contents on effective communication to achieve specific goals, such as the structuring of logical arguments and employing literary techniques

to achieve desired effects in the reader. We have also seen that publishers are able to prepare for the implementation of new guidelines by making suggestions to schools on how to incorporate new key areas in their teaching. It is safe to assume that these trends will become more pronounced in future textbooks screened by MEXT under the 2017 COS.

Now, this study is only preliminary and needs to be expanded to analyse this development more precisely. The COS is an important source for understanding policy intentions, but it does not provide the full picture. Firstly, there exists a rich accompanying literature that interprets and expands the COS in various ways to make it easier for teachers to implement the guidelines. It would be informative to study those in greater detail to get a more detailed picture of the ideas expressed in the COS. Likewise, it would be valuable to go both upstream and downstream from the COS to better contextualise the findings of this chapter. Upstream, we have MEXT and political decision-makers whose actions and motivations we need to study in greater detail to better understand the policymaking process. Downstream, we have the schools and teachers that act as the final implementers of education policy. Textbooks tell us something about how COS revisions change teaching, but not much can be said with certainty unless we gain insight into what is happening inside the classrooms.

Future studies should also expand the scope of this study by looking at elementary-school Japanese-language education. I decided to focus on junior high school in this study because that is the age group that takes the PISA test, but it goes without saying that if MEXT intended to improve reading literacy, they would implement reforms all the way down to the early school years.

Moreover, as mentioned earlier, I regret that space precludes discussion of the politics behind these education reforms in any detail. The reform initiatives promoted under the Abe administration, so long-lived in the Japanese context, certainly cannot be explained with reference to MEXT intentions alone. The connection between this political context and Japanese-language education reform ought to be studied more.

Finally, I mentioned that Japan once again dropped in the most recent 2018 PISA ranking for reading literacy. There are many possible explanations for this, but regardless of what reasons are identified, this will motivate further changes and reform initiatives, and so it is something we should follow with great interest.

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