There are things taken for granted in one’s native language and culture. The Japanese orthographic system is such an example. It is natural for Japanese people to use four different orthographic systems: *Hiragana* (Japanese syllabary), *Katakana* (used for foreign or borrowed words), *Kanji* (Chinese characters) and *Romaji* (romanized Japanese). In this respect, Japanese is a unique language because it has four different modes of written expressions. A sentence can be written in *Hiragana*, *Katakana*, *Kanji* and *Romaji*. In addition, Japanese script can be written horizontally from left to right, or vertically from top to bottom. Having four different writing systems seems to be complicated to people who need to learn only one. Japanese children, however, grow up in such a literacy world and acquire necessary literacy skills. When formal schooling begins in the first grade, elementary school teachers teach their students step by step how to read and write these four different scripts according to the policies established by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT).

Although the Japanese writing system looks complex, the literacy rate in Japan is high (Literacy, n.d.). The government measures the literacy rate using the school attendance rate (*Shikijiritsu*, n.d.). Nine years of compulsory education begins in the first grade, and the non-compulsory senior high school attendance rate is over 97 per cent (*Kotogakko*, n.d.). About 50 per cent of senior high school students enter university (*Heisei*, 2014). If junior college and technical college are included, 80 per cent of students receive education after senior high school. According to the survey about compulsory education conducted by the MEXT in 2003, 90 per cent of elementary school students and 78 per cent of junior high school students are satisfied with their schooling (*Kotogakko*, n.d.). The MEXT also surveyed how students think about each subject. About 10 per cent of elementary school students said that they liked language arts very much and about 40 per cent of them said that they like it (*Kyokano*, n.d.). For arithmetic, 26.7 per cent of students said that they like it very much and 31.6 per cent of them like it. For science, 29 per cent of students said that they like it very much and 33.9 per cent of them like it. It is clear that students show less favourable attitudes towards language arts than arithmetic and science.

**Language orthographic and phonological representations**

Japanese children first learn to read and write *Hiragana*. *Katakana* is taught in the second semester of the first grade and is completed by the end of the first semester of the second grade.
Children need to understand what kinds of words (loan and foreign words) should be written in *Katakana*. *Kanji* instruction starts from the second semester of the first grade and continues to the end of high school. Simple *Kanji* characters are first introduced, and both the writing and reading of the *Kanji* are practised. Students are expected to master 1,006 characters by the end of the sixth grade. In each grade, there is a list of *Kanji* characters students need to master. By the end of high school, students have acquired about 2,000 *Kanji* characters. There are two different readings of *Kanji*: *on* and *kun*. For example, the *Kanji* for a tree is 木 and is read as [moku] (Type *on*) or [ki] (Type *kun*). Sixty per cent of *Kanji* have two types of reading, and some *Kanji* have multiple readings. In Japanese writing, a word is written by using *Kanji* and *Hiragana*. For example, ‘go’ is written as ‘_visible く’*. This *Hiragana* following the *Kanji* is called *okurigana*.

*Romaji* (romanized Japanese) is introduced to students in the third grade of elementary school. Instruction of *Romaji* is different from learning the English alphabet. Students need to learn how Japanese words can be written in *Romaji* used in street and station names, direction boards, etc. There are two types of *Romaji*: *Kunreisiki*, the official *kana* romanization system, and the Hepburn system, developed by an American missionary of the same name, to transcribe the sounds of Japanese for Westerners. Students learn *Kunreisiki* first and then learn the Hepburn system.

All the sounds are independent vowels, or a consonant followed by a vowel. As both *Hiragana* and *Katakana* are syllabic, they are relatively easy to read because there is an almost one-to-one correspondence between symbol and pronounceable sounds. Omniglot provides a detailed explanation of *Hiragana*, *Katakana*, *Kanji* and *Romaji* (Ager, 1998–2015a, 1998–2015b, 1998–2015c, 1998–2015d).

**Early literacy**

**Preschool**

Formal schooling begins in the first grade, and kindergarten is not compulsory. However, parents place children in preschool for reasons ranging from childcare to early education. It is important to note that there are three different types of preschools for young children, each type overseen by a different ministry. Thus, there are some differences and similarities among these schools’ policies and structures.

A day-care centre, *hoikuen*, is under the administration of the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MOHLW). Kindergarten, *youchien*, are under the administration of the MEXT. As there is a greater need for childcare for working parents today, the lack of daycare centres is a serious issue. Therefore, the government has tried to combine these two facilities and established *nintei kodomo en* in 2006, to meet the increasing demands for childcare. This centre is certified by each prefecture’s regulations based on the guidelines which the MEXT and the MOHLW decide (*Nintei*, n.d.).

Although each type of school is administered by a different group, the aims of the language section stated in the courses of study and the guide to childcare are almost the same (Course of study for kindergarten, 2008; *Hoikusho*, 2008; *Hoikusho*, 2011). Children need to express themselves in their own spoken words and to develop listening skills to understand others. They should become familiar with picture books and stories. Although teaching *Hiragana* is not mentioned in the guidelines, having children become interested in characters and experience the joy of communication using characters in their daily life is included.
Eiko Kato-Otani

Elementary school

Although public schools are administered by the municipal boards of education, personnel administration and curriculum are managed by the MEXT and the prefectural boards of education. The revision of the course of study primarily grants leeway for educational content based on each school’s discretion. However, the MEXT determines the criteria, the character of the course of study and the administrative framework for textbook selection. The municipal boards of education organize a ‘standard curriculum’ and supervise small municipalities.

The course of study for elementary school (see the policy section below for details) defines early literacy success based on code learning in Grades 1 and 2 (Course of study for elementary, 2008; Shogakko, 2008). As Japanese children need to learn different writing systems, it is important for them to master Hiragana, Katakana and the required Kanji of the first two years. However, this code-focused instruction does not occur independent of meaning. Along with the form and pronunciation of each character, children are taught how it is used in a word, phrase or sentence (see Figure 17.1). They read stories, which get longer in Grade 2 textbooks (Miyaji et al., 2014b; Miyaji et al., 2014c). After they master Hiragana, they can express their thoughts in writing. For example, there is a letter-writing project in Grade 1, encouraging children to send a postcard to their grandparents or relatives. Through such activities, they come to know what kind of role written language plays. In addition to these projects, students are given written homework, quizzes and tests to measure their mastery. How well they understand what they read is measured by reading aloud.

By examining the courses of study, textbooks and workbooks, the definition of literacy success in Grade 1 and 2 is both code based as well as meaning-construction based. In order to read and write, students need to learn the code. They also need to learn the role of written language in their life. In PISA, students are tested on how they use different kinds of written text they face in their lives. Students are required not only to decode information and understand the literal interpretation, but they also must get information, interpret the text and examine what they read. Those who are placed in Level 5 are ‘capable of sophisticated critical thinking and may contribute to a world-class knowledge workers in tomorrow’s economy’ (OECD, n.d.: 34).

Policy implementation in practice

The revision of the courses of study generally occurs every ten years. The latest revision in 2008 continues to aim to nurture a ‘Zest for Life’ in students who live in a rapidly changing society (Improvement, n.d.). The 2008 courses of study enriched the content of education and increased the number of class periods. It emphasizes the balance between acquiring ‘basic and fundamental knowledge and knowledge and skills’ and fostering ‘the ability to think, make decisions, and express oneself’ (Improvement, n.d.; Gengo, 2011).

The MEXT employed a more relaxed education policy, called yutori kyoiku, in 2002 (Atarashii, n.d.) to reform the so-called ‘education hell’ (Nagano, 2009) Japanese students had faced for a long time. However, the low performance of Japanese students in the results of the 2003 PISA shocked the MEXT. Japanese students went down on the list in every area tested. In the reading section, Japanese students were placed 14th out of the 41 countries that participated. They were placed 8th of the 32 countries in 2000 (PISA, n.d.). They were placed 15th out of the 57 countries in 2006. This is believed to have affected the 2008
Figure 17.1  Example of a Hiragana writing practice in a Grade 1 textbook
Source: Miyaji et al., 2014a
courses of study. The overall goal of Japanese language study is stated in the courses of study 2008 as follows (Course of study for elementary, 2008: 1):

To develop in pupils the ability to properly express and accurately comprehend the Japanese language, to increase the ability to communicate, to develop the ability to think and imagine and sense of language, to deepen interest in the Japanese language, and to develop an attitude of respect for the Japanese language.

The National Assessment of Academic Ability in mathematics and Japanese have been given to Grade 6 students since 2007 (Zenkokutekina, n.d.). The results have shown that there are some challenges in the utilization of knowledge and skills. They affect the improvement in policies and teaching. Students performed better in the 2009 and 2012 PISA results. Japanese students were placed 8th out of the 65 countries in Reading in 2009 and 4th in 2012 (OECD, 2010, 2014). This shows that ‘courses of study’ affect students’ learning.

**Principal methods and content areas of literacy instruction**

**Preschool**

Although Hiragana instruction begins in the first grade, young children first begin to recognize Hiragana when they start preschool. Children’s belongings are all labelled in Hiragana and they begin to recognize how their name and their friends’ names are written in Hiragana. There are signs and written information in schools. By making children aware of these things, adults expect them to learn that there is a written language.

Having children become interested in and aware of a written language is a goal included in both the course of study (Course of study for kindergarten, 2008) and the guide to childcare (Hoikusho, 2008). There are activities by which children become interested in characters such as picture books, kanuta, Japanese card games and a pretend post office or store role play. In the kanuta game, a teacher reads the word of a card, children find the matching picture card by listening. The first letter of the script is written on the picture card (see Figure 17.2). Even if children cannot recognize the Hiragana letter, it is possible to find the correct card by looking at the picture. Through the game, children are expected to become familiar with Hiragana. In post-office role play, children pretend to write a letter and use fake money to buy stamps. Through pretend play like this, children come to understand written materials such as symbols, signs and money.

**Elementary school**

Literacy instruction begins from Hiragana, moving on to Katakana and Kanji in a step-by-step manner in elementary school. The first grade Japanese language book has a chart of Hiragana with a picture (see Figure 17.3) (Miyaji et al., 2014a). For example, は [a] is written with a picture of 筍 [ant]. Students chant the syllables across a row, [a] [i] [u] [e] [o] as a group, [ka] [ki] [ku] [ke] [ko] and so on following their teacher’s model reading. They also chant reading down the columns, e.g., [a] [ka] [sa] [ta] [na] [ha] [ma] [ya] [ra] [wa] [-n]. By learning how Hiragana is placed in order, they learn how to read each character. Students are instructed to pay attention to the shape of each character. Students are also instructed to pay attention to a voice consonant mark ‘ ‘, a semi-voiced sound mark ‘ ’, small kana, and how long vowels and geminate consonants are treated in written language. After they are able to read Hiragana characters, they practise reading words in the textbook.
Figure 17.2  Karuta, Japanese card game
Source: Hiragana dobutsu, n.d.

Figure 17.3  Hiragana chart in the Grade 1 textbook
Source: Miyaji et al., 2014a
Reading aloud is often practised with children. Students repeat after their teacher’s reading or read with their teacher. Although there is no space between words in Japanese writing, these reading materials have spaces between words to help students notice the ending of each word. Reading aloud is done in classes and given as homework. By listening to students’ reading aloud, teachers or parents can see whether or not they segment words properly. In addition, the same word has a different meaning depending on its intonation. For example, ‘hashi’ is ‘chopsticks’ if a higher pitch is given to the first syllable and it is a ‘bridge’ if a higher pitch is given to the second syllable. As Hiragana is phonogramic, reading aloud is considered to be important because teachers can see how children treat words.

An important part of Katakana instruction is learning when Katakana should be used. Students need to understand that Katakana is used for loanwords such as computer and chocolate.

Kanji instruction begins in the second semester of the first grade. Students need to master 80 Kanji characters that are allocated to Grade 1, 160 in Grade 2, 200 in Grade 3, 200 in Grade 4, 185 in Grade 5 and 181 in Grade 6. They start to learn simple characters – those with few strokes. In total, they learn 1006 Kanji characters in elementary school.

In order to have students understand how Kanji are created, there is a story about Kanji in the Grade 1 textbook (Miyaji et al., 2014a). In this story, a rabbit and a raccoon were taking cover from a sudden shower under the tree. The tree illustration looks like a Kanji character 木 (see Figures 17.4 and 17.5). In this way, teachers have students understand that Kanji developed from pictures of things. By understanding that Kanji are ideograms, students are helped to comprehend what each character means.

To teach how to write Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji, a penmanship workbook or drills are used (see Figure 17.6) (Kurikaeshi, n.d.). Teaching a proper sitting posture is included in the courses of study (Course of study for elementary, 2008; Shogakko, 2008) as well as in the Grade 1 textbook (see Figure 17.7). How to hold a pencil correctly is also taught. Items included in the penmanship workbook are to practise characters correctly, pay attention to length and direction, border and intersection of strokes, and the orthodox order of writing. As shown in the penmanship workbook in Figure 17.6, the strokes are numbered to show the correct order for writing them. Students practise writing Kanji used in a word, phrase and sentence, as shown in Figure 17.6. Therefore, children learn to understand how independent Kanji can be used in context.

Provision for children with special educational needs

After a classroom teacher first identifies students who have trouble learning how to read and write, they need to examine whether it is caused by lack of practice or learning disorders (Hirose, personal communication, 18 December 2014). The normal procedure is that a developmental test or a medical exam is administered. Based on the results, the internal schooling guidance committee (Tokubetsu, n.d.) and/or the schooling guidance committee of the educational board in the city or town decides how students should be treated. Various approaches such as providing an additional teacher in the student’s classroom, small group instruction, team teaching or instruction in homogeneous groups are instituted. Small classes may be established for children with comparatively mild disabilities. Children with disabilities who are enrolled in regular classes may visit resource rooms to receive special instruction.
Figure 17.4  Story illustration in the Grade 1 textbook

Source: Miyaji et al., 2014a

Figure 17.5  Kanji are ideograms illustrated in the Grade 1 textbook

Source: Miyaji et al., 2014a
Figure 17.6  Penmanship workbook

Source: Kurikaeshi, n.d.

Figure 17.7  Proper sitting posture and pencil holding in the Grade 1 textbook

Source: Miyaji et al., 2014a
Early literacy policy and practice in Japan

Variety of literacy materials available

For preschool children, both the course of study (Course of study for kindergarten, 2008) and the guide to childcare (Hoikusho, 2008) suggest the use of picture books to develop children’s early literacy. For elementary school children, picture book stories are used in textbooks (Miyaji et al., 2014a). For learning how to write Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji, template-based workbooks (Kurikaeshi, n.d.) are provided in addition to the textbooks in Grade 1. For writing development, teachers provide project type worksheets that require one of the scripts in Grade 2. Upper-grade students work on projects like making a newspaper (Kokugoryoku, 2008).

In order to promote reading, the MEXT created a reading programme plan in 2002 (Kodomo, 2002), involving family, community and school. The municipal governments as well as public libraries provide picture-book-reading workshops for parents. The course of study states that children should be educated to learn the joy of reading (Course of study for elementary, 2008). Therefore, ‘morning reading time’ is exercised in over 8,000 schools. In 1993, the MEXT established a guideline for the number of books each school should have based on the number of classes it has (Gakko, 2011). The average number of books elementary schools had was 9,601 and the average annual expenditure for an elementary school library was $4,500 in 2014 (2014 Nendo, n.d.). The Grade 1 textbook (Miyaji et al., 2014a) has a list of recommended books that includes various types of books.

Major challenges for current and future early literacy provision

As kindergarten is not compulsory in Japan, the early literacy instruction children receive depends on their parents and preschool. Although the course of study and the guide to childcare state that preschool teachers should read picture books to children, how adults and children should interact with picture books is not prescribed, despite the widespread evidence that interactions during book reading are important for children’s language and cognitive development (Bus et al., 1995; Dickinson and Snow, 1987; Goldfield and Snow, 1984; Ninio, 1980; Scarborough et al., 1991; Snow, 1983; Snow and Ninio, 1986; Sorsby and Martlew, 1991; Teale, 1986). In the book-reading research in Japan, Japanese mothers did not use challenging talk, such as ‘why’ questions during book reading (Kato-Otani, 2003) to develop cognitive skills. As found in Minami’s study, Japanese children learn how to tell a story from their mothers’ narrative styles (1996). These studies show that adults are a model of language skills for children.

Children should also become familiar with written language and teachers provide necessary early instruction. However, education-focused private preschools and educational service companies attract parents who want their children to receive early education. Thus, when children enter elementary school, there are students who have different literacy skills. This is a challenge for elementary school teachers who teach Grade 1. Some children are fully capable of reading and writing Hiragana and others need to learn how to write it. As mentioned in the early childhood education section, different ministries supervise different types of preschools. The purpose of each school was originally different as they served different populations. The teacher qualifications are also different. Thus, more precise and universal guidelines for early literacy instruction at the preschool level should be established by the government. According to the Action Program for Pre-School Education (Yoji, n.d.), the MEXT will continue to promote a unified centre for early childhood education and care, nintei kodomo en. One of the policies of the Action Program for Pre-School Education
includes cooperation between preschool and elementary school education (Nintei, n.d.). This may connect preschool and elementary education.

The first two years of elementary school education focuses on how to read and write Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji. However, to avoid the Chinese saying ‘A mere scholar, unable to practically use what he has learned’, the course of study suggests various projects in which to use the literacy skills students have acquired, such as collecting information on events, analysing them, writing a report and giving a presentation. In order to do so, students need to cultivate introspection, develop the desire to learn and think, learn to be independent to make decisions, take actions or deal with problems. There are classroom activities proposed by various scholars to promote student development in these areas (Ando, 2008; Uematsu and Kenmochi, 2014; Saigo, 2012; Kokugoryoku, 2008). It will take more time to examine how the current course of study is working for such purposes. Teacher training is also important and necessary to shift from knowledge-based instruction to more student-centred, active learning instruction.

Japan is, by and large, a homogeneous and monolingual society. However, the number of foreign children whose parents come to Japan for job opportunities is increasing. Japanese as a Second Language instruction is established in schools in which there are a number of foreign students. However, developing the multilingual literacy or language skills of these children is not discussed much. Raising these children in a bilingual environment is not easy because of the lack of resources, teachers and funding. The number of foreign children is expected to grow because Japan needs workers due to the decreased birth rate. If Japan continues to have these students in schools, serious examinations and discussion about multilingual literacy and language skills should begin.

References


Early literacy policy and practice in Japan


