

# A Preliminary Analysis of English Education Curriculum and its Recent Trends in Japan with a Focus on Technical Colleges (KOSEN)

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This paper examines English education and curriculum at technical colleges in Japan, comparing the overall objectives of English education set forth by the Ministry of Education in the Course of Study, and the National Institute of Technology in the Model Core Curriculum. It also compares recent research trends in English education for both technical colleges and not. This paper found that although there are many similarities between the Course of Study and Model Core Curriculum, the latter seems to focus more heavily on practical communication skills rather than intercultural appreciation. For research trends, it was apparent that there is an emphasis on research about grammar, writing, and standardized tests at technical colleges, while general English education appears to be leaning more towards student motivation and autonomy. There was also discovered to be a discrepancy between the Model Core Curriculum guidelines and research trends at technical colleges, with less articles about English speaking and communication than expected.

Keywords: KOSEN, English education, MEXT, Model Core Curriculum, globalization

## 1. Background

### 1.1. Origin and History of KOSEN

“KOSEN” is the common English translation for what is also called a “technical college” or “institute of technology” in Japan. The name KOSEN comes from a method of abbreviating the full Japanese title, “koto-senmon gakko”, and is not, in fact, a five-word acronym despite being written in all capital letters. To understand what KOSEN is, it is first necessary to understand how the Japanese education system works.

Japanese compulsory education consists of a primary school, called “shogakko” (i.e. elementary school), from ages 6 to 12, and a secondary school, called “chugakkou” (i.e. junior high school), from ages 12 to 15. These six-year and 3-year long schools, respectively, are similar to that of elementary and middle school systems in the United States, with one exception: a student’s school grade is solely determined by their age, and skipping or repeating grades is not possible.

Although junior high school is technically the end of state-required schooling, the vast majority of Japanese children continue on to a three-year senior high school, called “koto-gakko”, which is where the KO of KOSEN originates. While there are still education guidelines set by the Ministry of Education for senior high school, there is a greater variety in subjects taught compared to elementary and junior high school, and students can also be held back a grade if they do not meet the specific requirements.

If a student graduates from senior high school, they have an even wider variety of options to choose from; they can enter the workforce, or continue education into a four-year university or a two-year vocational school. These vocational schools are called “senmon gakko”, and this is the origin of the SEN of KOSEN.

In short, KOSEN is the name of a five-year post-secondary school, combining the three years of senior high school with two years of vocational school. That said, while vocational schools can specialize in a wide-range of fields, KOSEN are strictly for engineering. When a student graduate from a KOSEN, they receive the equivalent of a associates degree in a particular field of engineering such as machinal, chemical, electrical, etc. It can be said that KOSEN is a unique educational institution both in Japan and in the world, and makes it a valuable area of education research (KOSEN, 2021)

The majority of KOSEN schools were established between 1962 and 1974, in response to Japan’s post-war economic boom and the subsequent increased need for a skilled workforce, with the earlier years of this time frame coinciding with the aftermath of the post-war baby boom. The most recently established KOSEN is that of Okinawa in 2002, making the number of KOSEN come to a total of 63, of which 55 are national, five are municipal, and three are private.

In 2004, the National Institute of Technology was established in Tokyo to oversee the national KOSEN with the goal of raising the standards of secondary education by producing graduates with technical creative skills and practical knowledge for working in engineering. It can be said that the overarching reason for this was to try and improve the struggling Japanese economy.

## 1.2. Declining Population and Globalization

Japan’s population has been in decline every year for the past 40 years, with no signs of improving. This phenomenon, combined with a general move away from sciences, has changed the process by which KOSEN attracts potential students. Immediately following the establishment of KOSEN, the acceptance rate was less than 6%, but that grew to over 50% by 2005. In 2015, it was 56% (Amano, 2014).

The struggle to attract potential students appears to be universal with higher education in Japan, with the number of 18-year-olds steadily decreasing since 1992. As early as 11 years ago, the Ministry of Education (MEXT) published reports on producing more “global citizens” through education to stimulate the economy once they enter the workforce (Humphries, 2014).

In 2011, MEXT held a meeting called “Promotion of Global Citizens Development by Industry-Academic Collaboration”, at which it was discussed how, essentially, Japan needs to train its students to be able to keep up with the quickly changing global society of today, or else to fall behind other countries in economic power.

The term “global citizen” is defined by MEXT as someone who possesses the following three qualities: language abilities and communication skills; independence, flexibility, curiosity, and a sense of responsibility; understanding of different cultures and identity as a Japanese person (MEXT, 2012).

These represent a student’s skills, character, and knowledge, respectively. As for the first quality, “language abilities and communication skills”, although not concretely stated, it can be assumed that English is a big part of this, seeing as how English is long established as a global lingua franca.

It is clear that MEXT also believes that English is essential for globalizing its students, as Japan’s English level being low is brought up as one of the obstacles to tackle. For example, in 2012, MEXT reported the average TOEFL (iBT) for each country, and Japan’s average score was 70 points out of a possible 120.

This placed Japan as #135 out of 163 countries in the world, and #27 out of 30 countries in Asia. While it can be said that Japan, currently the world’s third largest economy, has not had a need to promote English education in the past, it is clear that the Japanese government believes that English skills will be necessary to continue to hold that spot

amidst a declining population.

## 2. English Curriculum

### 2.1. MEXT Course of Study

The next issue to address is, that while MEXT makes it known that it wants to raise students' English abilities, to what extent can MEXT enforce curriculum? As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, compulsory curriculum consists of only elementary school and junior high school, which are six years and three years respectively. MEXT sets forth the curriculum for these through its periodically-updated "Course of Study", or "gakushu-shido yoryo" in Japanese, literally translated to mean "learning-guidance guidelines". The Course of Study was most recently updated in 2019, and, in terms of study hours, seemingly places English of the highest important, giving English the highest number of required study hours for junior high school starting from the 2020 school year, with 140 required hours for all three years.

It seems to be that MEXT is trying to move away from the traditional grammar-translation method of learning English, which has been common in Japanese schools until recent: The overall goals for English education are stated as: to develop students' basic communication skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening; deepen students' understanding of language and culture; and foster a positive attitude towards communication through foreign languages. The specific objectives are as follows:

- (1) To enable students to understand the speaker's intentions when listening to English.
- (2) To enable students to talk about their own thoughts using English.
- (3) To accustom and familiarize students with reading English and to enable them to understand the writer's intentions when reading English.
- (4) To accustom and familiarize students with writing in English and to enable them to write about their own thoughts using English.

Universities and other higher education institutes, including KOSEN, are not controlled by MEXT's Course of Study. At most, MEXT requests universities to "provide students with a wide breadth of knowledge and general ability to reason" but leave the designing of the curriculum up to each university. KOSEN, on the other hand, since the establishment of the National Institute of Technology, has its own guidelines for curriculum called the Model Core Curriculum (MCC).

### 2.2. Model Core Curriculum

In the MCC, last updated in 2017, English is included as a required subject for all majors. The goals for KOSEN's five-year English education are:

- (1) To acquire the basic knowledge and skills necessary for using English in real-life situations.
- (2) To be able to understand and express, with relative accuracy and fluency, ideas about one's own personal life and thinking.
- (3) To be able to understand, express, and share opinions about social topics and one's own area of expertise.

While both the MEXT Course of Study and the KOSEN MCC emphasize self-expression through all four basic English skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening), it seems that MEXT has a slightly stronger focus on cultural understanding, mentioning foreign languages other than English, while KOSEN has a slightly stronger focus on communication, mentioning English debates and discussions. It can be assessed that MEXT has the overall goal to create global citizens in a general sense, while KOSEN is aiming to produce engineers who can work effectively in

international settings.

### 3. Recent Research in English Education

#### 3.1. COCET Research

COCET stands for the Council of College English Teachers, and is the English education academic committee for KOSEN English instructors. In lieu of conducting a full-scale questionnaire for KOSEN teachers, or a full-scale analysis of English syllabi from each English course, looking at the research topics of recent may be one way to see some of the trends in English education. The most recent publication by COCET is the 40<sup>th</sup> edition, from March 2021, which contains 16 papers.

These 16 papers cover a range of topics related to grammar, written English, communication, spoken English, intercultural studies, and distance learning. Several papers fall into more than one of these categories, but the number of papers dealing with spoken English or communication were four, while the number of papers dealing with written English or grammar was twice that at eight. Only looking at this, there seems to be an unbalance of focus between the speaking/listening skills and reading/writing skills of English at KOSEN currently.

One of the papers in this publication (Yamamoto et al, 2021), however, looks at all previous COCET papers from publications 17 through 38, for a total of 334 papers. In this research, the authors picked out the “50 Most Frequent Words” from the paper titles, which included “reading”, “writing”, “grammar”, and “listening”, but did not include any words related to speaking, communication, or intercultural understanding.

In fact, this paper specifically notes that TOEIC, along with EIKEN, has been a heavy focus of COCET papers for the past several years. This suggests that a large number of English courses at KOSEN are designed to prepare students for these English standardized tests, which may be required when students leave KOSEN to enter the workforce or move onto even higher education.

#### 3.2. ARELE and KATE Research

ARELE, or the Annual Review of English Language Education, is a journal similar to COCET while differing in the fact that it looks at all English education in Japan, not just KOSEN. For comparison, a paper looking at ARELE papers from publications 1-24 (Mizumoto et al, 2014) examines recent English education research trends. What this paper found was, in addition to research shifting from teaching to learning, suggesting a trend towards student autonomy, that the first 12 volumes had common title words including “communication”, “intercultural”, and “discussion”, while the second half of the 24 papers had common titles words including “vocabulary”, “inference”, “motivation”. It is interesting to note that the research topic emphasis on communication was greater in earlier papers, but that does not necessarily means a smaller focus on communication in the actual classroom.

KATE is another non-KOSEN journal, standing for Kantokoshinetsu Association of Teachers of English. Another systematic review of English education research (Honda et al, 2018) also concludes the same as Mizumoto (2014), noting a trend from teaching to learning, i.e. more research focused on learner autonomy and student motivation. However, there was no clear mention of a trend either to or away from research on speaking and communication skills.

#### 3.3. Other Research

Another paper on KOSEN English education (Humphries and Burns, 2015) notes of this same phenomenon about the lack of speaking and communication focus in the curriculum, stating that “communicative language teaching (CLT)” has been historically difficult at KOSEN for a variety of reasons, including lack of confidence in curriculum design and lack of professional support for KOSEN teachers of English. This could be related to the fact that although KOSEN includes students who are of high school age, and therefore often utilize high school English textbooks, KOSEN teachers, like university teachers, are not required to have a teaching license.

The same researcher (Humphries & Stroupe, 2014) also comments on how the KOSEN system reduced motivation on the students' side, noting that unlike high school students, there is no need to study for a university entrance exam, which would include an English portion. This takes pressure off of the students to prepare for a pass-or-fail exam such as that, and rather prepare for a points-based test such as TOEIC which can be taken and retaken as many times as the student pleases.

#### 4. Conclusion and Analysis

##### 4.1. Summary of Findings

This research's purpose was to serve as a general and preliminary look into how the English education at KOSEN, a unique educational institute that has existed in Japan for almost 60 years now, compares to that of non-KOSEN English education. First, in comparing the objectives for English education put forth by MEXT with the objectives put forth by the MCC, more similarities were noticed than differences. For example, both MEXT and the MCC specify the need for practical, well-rounded English communication skills to prepare Japanese students for life after graduation. One slight difference, however, was that MEXT seems to put more focus on global and intercultural understanding, while the MCC seems to put more focus on personal expression and communication.

When looking at trends in English education research, the KOSEN-specific journal COCET showed a tendency for KOSEN teachers of English to do research on topics related more to grammar, writing, and standardized tests, rather than topics related to speaking or communication. As for English education research in general, there appears to be a trend from topics about teaching to topics about learning, signaling a shift in focus from teacher instruction to student motivation and autonomy.

##### 4.2. Questions and Future Research

Firstly, only looking at the curriculum objectives set by MEXT or the National Institute of Technology does not necessarily give a clear picture as to how English courses are actually conducted. There is a need to find out to what extent current English instructors are actually designing their courses to abide by those objectives. One method to do so would be to do an analysis of syllabi from KOSEN English courses and undergrad English courses (of varying majors, including engineering) and compare the contents to the MCC and the Course of Study. It would also be of interest to know how English education differs for KOSEN students and their same-aged peers in high school and undergraduate programs.

Another unclear point is what the actual trends in English education are. While research analysis can show trends in education research, and it's understandable to assume that there is at least some connection between education research and education itself, it is not in itself definitive.

Lastly, although national KOSEN schools are under the National Institute of Technology umbrella, there is still a relative amount of freedom in curriculum design, similar to universities under MEXT. Therefore, an extensive look at each KOSEN and how the English curriculum differs between schools could also prove to be very interesting and informative research, which will one day hopefully lead to advancements and improvements in English education at KOSEN and elsewhere.

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