

Quality and Quantity: A Consideration of Educational Frameworks and Schemes

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Abstract

The tendency to reconstruct the university curriculum has been accelerated in Japan. Some universities attempt to extend the length of each lecture hour and adopt the quarter system. It seems epochal, but it could bring gaps between higher education and secondary education. In the age of universal university admission, universities in Japan face challenging issues and try to address them through the process of trial and error. In this paper, one issue a women's university in the Kyushu region faces will be examined as a case study. It will be argued that any school curriculum should be planned by considering its spirit, tradition, and environment.

Keywords: mandatory course, ninety-minute class, sixty-minute class,
university English program, women's university

Introduction

Schools have been reformed constantly. The pandemic of COVID-19, in particular, forced schools into remote teaching. This unexpected social condition stimulated the adoption of new teaching methods. Now schools generally have a more positive attitude towards the use of technology. Generative AI has been remarkably improved and people are getting familiar with it. Meanwhile, face-to-face learning is being reassessed. Being able to communicate without any restriction such as keeping social distance and wearing masks is a privilege we should be grateful for. Students can broaden their horizons by engaging in pair/group work such as interviews, discussions, and presentations. Partaking in various kinds of activities enables students to learn a subject from different angles. As we enter the age of universal university admission, there would be differences in proficiency level and learning styles. How have students improved their skills before entering university? It is essential that primary education, middle education, and higher education cooperate with

each other.

This paper will focus on very particular challenges schools face, for instance, efforts to implement school projects at primary and middle education and design a curriculum in higher education. A comparative study can disclose strengths and weaknesses, and similarities and differences.

Tendencies of Young Learners Education

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is planning to reduce the length of class hours at elementary school and junior high school. The Japan Times (December 25th, 2024) reports:

Education minister Toshiko Abe on Wednesday asked a government panel to consider ways to give schools more discretion to determine class hours and content as part of a planned overall revision of the country's school curriculum guidelines. ... Abe underlined the need for a flexible educational curriculum that will encourage the ingenuity of each school and board of education in order to make schools more inclusive for children from various backgrounds. The minister aims to consider expanding the discretion of schools on the standard hours of instruction per subject and the curriculum content for each grade. Given the working environment of teachers, the minister said that "the standard total class hours per year should be decided on the basis that they will not increase from the current level." ... For the first time, the ministry will ask elementary school first-graders to third-year high school students about classes, textbooks and their future visions of themselves and society. Their opinions will be used in discussions on the revisions to the curriculum guidelines.

This educational reform could help children maintain concentration and lighten teachers burden as well. Some schools have already introduced their particular projects and they have become part of the schools daily routine. One activity that is becoming familiar is reading in the morning. It seems to have a wide-ranging effect, though it isn't conducive to the acquisition of knowledge. Asano Dokusho Suishin Kyogikai, an organization that promotes extensive reading in the classroom, states that during reading time, it is advisable that students and a teacher should read their favorite books for ten minutes

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every morning. They insist that this morning reading activity can bring physical and mental effects such as improving concentration, growing reading comprehension, reducing absence and lateness, communicating with family and friends more frequently, and realizing other people's feelings. They also instituted a survey to gain evidence of its prevalence in elementary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools all over Japan in June, 2024. It shows that 76% (25,688 schools) are in effect, especially high in elementary schools (82%) and junior high schools (81%).

On the other hand, there are activities related to sporting ability such as riding a unicycle. The Japan Unicycling Association says riding a unicycle can make children feel a sense of accomplishment through their successful experiences. Their success can motivate them to play sports, cultivate determination to take on new challenges, as well as build a good sense of balance, reflexes, agility, and concentration. It can promote physical exercise and other multiple effects, similar to reading books in the morning. These activities such as reading in the morning and riding a unicycle can serve the purposes of more than a single school subject such as language education or physical education.

Another instance is that of taking a nap after lunch break called Utouto Time at Uto Junior and Senior High School. The following is about this nap taking in The Asahi Shimbun (March 3rd, 2024):

UTO, Kumamoto Prefecture—Kids caught napping in the classroom at prefecture-run Uto Junior and Senior High School here are not punished. Quite the reverse. They are encouraged. ... The short nap can reduce sleepiness that has accumulated since the morning. Students engage in classroom cleanup duties immediately after their nap to clear any lingering cobwebs so they can attend afternoon classes feeling refreshed. Utouto Time was introduced in 2015.

Though this activity is not directly related to any school subject, it could generally influence the participants' lifestyle. It resembles one of Aesop's fables: The North Wind and the Sun. It is natural that people get sleepy when they eat their fill. Therefore, it is quite difficult to keep them awake after lunch. It can also demonstrate the truth behind the proverb 'slow and steady wins the race.'

Attempts at Universities

Regarding universities, students don't have regular homeroom activities and meetings. Each course tends to be conducted individually by a teacher though sometimes several teachers share responsibilities of teaching a single class. The whole school or departments within the school rarely undertake a joint project. Universities are forced to set a curriculum by following guideline stipulated by Standards for Establishment of Universities translated by Japanese Law Translation:

(Term of Classes for Each Class Subject)

Article 23 Classes of each class subject are conducted with 10 weeks or 15 weeks as a unit; provided, however, that classes may be conducted for a specific term shorter than these, when it is deemed to be especially necessary from an educational standpoint.

It is significant to offer effective approaches within the restricted time. Universities generally have two semesters and offer ninety-minute classes within a fifteen-week time frame, but nowadays many schools are attempting to restructure the curriculum such as four quarters and the extension of each lecture. According to The Asahi Shimbun Think Campus (December 6th, 2024), some universities have started to extend the length of each lecture, as the following examples illustrate: 105-minute classes at University of Tokyo and Hitotsubashi University; 100-minute classes at Meiji University, Shibaura Institute of Technology, Hosei University, Sophia University, Rikkyo University, Kanto Gakuin University, and Waseda University.

Such changes in the academic calendar have many advantages. It can be expected to result in longer vacation between semesters. The course of ninety-minute classes requires fifteen weeks while a 105-minute class is offered in thirteen weeks and 100-minute in fourteen weeks. It is possible for students to spend their time on internship programs, skill training, and fieldwork, not to mention studying abroad or working part-time. Teachers can engage in professional development. Another advantage is that students can learn intensively each week during the semester. Classes can incorporate active or passive activities, and individual or group work. Students acquire basic knowledge by listening to explanations, engaging in exercises, and reviewing. They also promote their learning with

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practical activities such as discussions, presentations, experiments, and investigations. Therefore, a weekly ninety-minute lecture might be considered too short to encompass these activities.

However, it seems that this approach can be implemented effectively for prestigious institutions in urban areas. If students are highly motivated and intellectually curious, longer classes can be effective. As for first-year students, even ninety-minute classes, not to mention 100-minute or 105-minute classes, seem quite long after graduating from high school that offers fifty-minute lessons. Concerning the importance of lessons, each class becomes more valuable. If students miss a lesson, they might fall into a vicious circle. They lose the opportunity to engage in activities and consequently cannot catch up with the class after their absence. It is possible that they lose interest and skip more lectures. It could become more difficult for students to gain credits or graduate. At a time when all applicants can secure a place at some universities, students' temperament could vary. Any new scheme should be examined circumspectly within the context of each school.

Additionally, extension of each class delays the time of leaving school. Each class ends ten or fifteen minutes later than usual which can make the final period end approximately an hour later than usual. If universities were located in areas convenient for public transportation, the school timetable could be acceptable. In other words, it might not be feasible to implement such a policy at women's universities in outlying areas. Not only the academic calendar but also any school curriculum should be planned according to its geographical location and types of learners. According to Inaba (2020), Tamagawa University launched 100-minute classes for fifteen weeks in 1995 and it has an option of giving a ten-minute interval after fifty minutes. Students experience less burden than in ninety-minute classes though teachers think that the interval can ruin the flow of the lecture as the lesson reaches the optimal state of learning after fifty minutes. There are strengths and weaknesses in any teaching schedule.

Case Study

Regarding language education, it is meaningful to learn regularly throughout a semester. A particular scheme adopted at Fukuoka Jo Gakuin, a women's university in the Kyushu region, will be explored in detail. Hosokawa and Hirata (2022) explain that Fukuoka Jo Gakuin established the English Education Centre in 2001, and the centre was further

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reorganized as the Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching (CSELT) as an organization within the university. The CSELT conducts six undertakings:

1. Managing University English Program
2. CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) education
3. English education workshop, lecture meetings, and teacher training support
4. Support for English education in cooperation with junior and senior high schools
5. Publishing the journal “The Centre for the Study of English Language Teaching JOURNAL”
6. Counselling and tutoring currently enrolled students for TOEIC®

The University English Program consists of mandatory and elective classes. Four mandatory courses called First-year English (hereafter FYE) are offered to all first-year students who belong to seven departments that belong to one of three faculties. Each course is conducted for sixty minutes twice a week, totaling twenty-three hours per term. Students learn English communicatively to improve the four skills. All teachers generally speak English in class though some teachers are from English speaking countries and others are from Japan. Students take a placement test before the semester starts. The English classes offered to students of every department are tracked into different levels, depending on their academic achievement. Each class consists of on average of twenty students.

There are a variety of elective courses: Test Preparation for first-year students and older, Speaking Skills, Reading Skills, Listening Skills, and Writing Skills for sophomores and older, and Academic Reading for juniors and seniors.

These classes last ninety minutes and meet once a week. Students can retake the same class up to a maximum of four times during their college days. They can plan to take a variety of courses or pursue their interests and overcome their shortcomings. Classes consist of students from different departments so students learn on their own initiative and can also make new friends.

There are two types of classes at this school. The timetable is shown in Table 1:

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Table 1. Class hours

period	ninety-minute class	period	sixty-minute class
1	9:15-10:45		9:45-10:45
chapel hour	10:55-11:15	chapel hour	10:55-11:15
2	11:25-12:55		11:25-12:25
lunch break	12:55-13:45	lunch break	12:25-13:05
3	13:45-15:15		13:05-14:05
			14:15-15:15
4	15:25-16:55		15:25-16:25
			16:35-17:35
5	17:05-18:35		17:45-18:45

There are five periods for ninety-minute classes and seven periods for sixty-minute classes. Each class is divided by a ten-minute break which allows students and teachers to move to the next classroom. A chapel service is held between the first and second periods every weekday although not all Christian schools perform a daily service. If classes were extended to 100 or 105 minutes, the final period would end at 19:25 or 19:50. Arguably, the beginning time couldn't be moved forward to nine o'clock or even earlier because of long-distance commuting and transportation conditions. The bell rings for ninety-minute classes, signaling the beginning and end of each lesson. As for sixty-minute classes, students and teachers are required to pay attention to time because the bell doesn't ring at the beginning or end of their lesson.

Concerning FYE, students take four courses throughout a year: AI and BI in the first semester and AII and BII in the second semester. A is held on Mondays and Thursdays while B is on Tuesdays and Fridays. There are four groups in the timetable as described in Table 2:

Table 2. Class schedule of First-year English

period	Mon. (A)	Tues. (B)	Thurs. (A)	Fri. (B)
	W	Y	X	Z
	X	Z	W	Y
	Y	W	Z	X
	Z	X	Y	W

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For instance, students in Department W study AI/AII on Monday and Thursday mornings, and BI/BII on Tuesday and Friday afternoons while those in Department Z learn AI/AII on Monday and Thursday afternoons and BI/BII on Tuesday and Friday mornings. This system aims to be fair because students in all departments are required to take classes offered during the first, second, fourth, and fifth periods. Students' regular attendance sometimes results from class schedule. This timetable can help students including late risers and bus commuters who tend to have to face traffic congestion in the morning. This plan seems to have an effect to minimize the number of repeaters who miss too many lessons.

On the other hand, this situation can cause problems for students. It will take time for them to get used to the schedule. Firstly, the bell doesn't ring at the beginning of the first and fourth periods, and the end of the second and fifth periods. Students need to be punctual enough to arrive in time. Teachers should also be good timekeepers so as to finish teaching by the end of each period. Additionally, afternoon classes are somewhat confusing. The sixty-minute class taught during the fourth period is held at the same time as the third period of ninety-minute class. The fifth period is simultaneously held with the fourth period of the ninety-minute class. A couple of students show up after the lesson ends, especially at the beginning of the semester. Classes are divided based on their placement test scores, so some students are separated from close friends as they go to different classrooms. It usually takes a week or so to get used to their schedule and make friends in class.

Secondly, several students find the differences between FYE AI/AII and BI/BII confusing. For instance, on Tuesday after a Monday holiday, a few students bring a wrong textbook which is for AI/AII. If they sense the inconvenience of taking notes without a textbook once, their experience can make them more attentive and careful in the future. This careless attitude might be corrected by students' own attention to details as well as teachers' reminder given at the end of the previous week. It is important to establish weekly routines and pay attention to irregular matters. Though a very small number of students bring the wrong textbook or make an error in attendance, most students show up in time and are well-prepared.

Regarding textbooks, teachers need to adopt appropriate ones carefully. They must select topics familiar to students and those that arouse their curiosity. Moreover, most books consist of fifteen chapters which are designed for ninety-minute courses. Teachers

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must teach flexibly so that they can also use textbooks for sixty-minute courses. It seems difficult to complete one chapter in a lesson. To address this problem, teachers sometimes select some activities while skipping other parts. They also focus on communicative activities where students work in pairs or in groups.

One of the advantages for teaching classes that meet regularly is that there is a short timespan between the lessons. Lectures held once a week need to review course material after a week, or sometimes after two weeks if there is a holiday. However, for lessons held twice a week, a quick review is enough after an interval of a few days or a week. Though variation exists, students tend to remember their previous lesson relatively clearly. They study four times a week and do homework, where they study English almost every day. Consequently, English learning becomes part of their daily life.

One of the disadvantages might be that classes become mundane and lack of novelty. When classes are held more regularly, it is easy for them to become boring and repetitive. To prevent this from happening, teachers rotate teaching different classes. For classes A and B, the students are taught by different teachers for both semesters. This means that they are taught by two teachers using different approaches. Because of the rotation of teachers, students are taught by different teachers during both semesters. Students can at most learn from four teachers in a year. Additionally, there are a wide range of techniques teachers use for promoting speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Teachers study pedagogy in depth to ensure language acquisition. They attend closely to their students, trying hard to meet their academic needs and improve their skills. A university includes various types of students. Each class has characteristics that depend on its academic level and department. Some students are creative and liberal while others are diligent and serious hard workers. Some classes consist of quiet students while other classes include more sociable and talkative students. Teachers cultivate their own teaching skills as well. Native teachers of English and Japanese teachers of English have strengths that are peculiar to their backgrounds. The former uses authentic English in the classroom while the latter shares with students the difficulties in learning a second language.

On the contrary, the short interval between lessons makes teachers busy. When they give an assignment, they are required to offer feedback immediately. They also prepare for the following lesson within a short time. They have a specific goal to be accomplished in each lesson, and complete an activity in sixty minutes. If trouble occurs with any

equipment found in class, it might be loss of valuable time. Wasting a few minutes could affect the rest of the lesson. Though they cannot avoid accidents, they must make effective use of devices and time when they show slides using the screen, play sound files through the speaker, write on the board, and hand out paper materials.

Frequent lessons within a short span of time can bring another positive aspect. FYE seems to have a function similar to a homeroom class. Teaching twice a week enables close contact and communication between learners and teachers. Students convene four times a week, except on Wednesdays, so they meet almost every weekday. They also have spare time before or after class because the class hour is thirty minutes shorter than ninety-minute classes. They greet and make small talk before class starts. After class they don't have to leave immediately for the following class, so they can stay behind to ask questions and do assignments together if they want to. University students have no fixed classrooms and seats, which might prevent them from finding the occasion to make friends. Takano (2023) claims that learning in general education courses can help build friendship. He hopes that students on the whole are enthusiastic to interact with others though the purpose of the courses isn't about making friends.

In fact, the atmosphere of FYE classes is generally friendly. It seems that classmates can communicate with each other and with their teachers. Topics in textbooks are mostly related to their daily life. They have the opportunity to discuss their lifestyle including hobbies and favorites. They also exchange and share information not only about learning English but also about their general school life. First-year students often experience many new things on campus. They are usually informed by the school about important matters online. Unless they ignore or misread something important, they can help each other collect the correct information. Teachers also support their school life by advising on events, applying for certificates, giving directions on campus, and so on.

The teaching schedule involves the whole school. The teaching staff in the program needs to share and follow the guidelines in order to ensure an effective English program. Moreover, thanks to the staff's understanding at university, this scheme can be effectively realized. It is not easy to carry out such a curriculum. Having an alternative timetable seems to be unfavorable in certain ways and some teachers outside the English Program might feel inconvenient. The academic affairs section of the school in particular tries hard to make the necessary adjustments to the schedule, involving many subjects. But now that

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is being carried out, it seems effective for both students and teachers.

The school's foundation is built on Christianity and English. Hirakawa (2020) maintains that the Board of Missions played a major role in female education in modern Japan. To be specific, mission schools commenced with reading the Bible, singing hymns, and learning English. They can still function as pioneers of language teaching. It is valuable to have a great regard for the school tradition and protect its own identity amidst so much diversity.

Conclusion

Some efforts to bring educational change were described. An academic calendar should be determined by the actual conditions that must be met. Longer lectures within a short span of time can offer intensive, deeper learning. It also enables students and teachers to make effective use of their spare time during longer vacation. Frequent shorter lessons can provide the opportunity for students to study regularly, offer quick feedback, and promote friendship by means of in-class communication. Schools should deliberate which mode of organizing classes is effective by considering their students and subjects being taught.

Teaching and learning encourage interaction between teachers and students. Teachers are required to identify what and how students would like to learn. Teachers used to be students, so they need to recall what they needed as learners and observe their students carefully. On the other hand, the passage of time can cause differences in social trends. Teachers need to exert their originality and ingenuity when facing any new situation. As for constructing a curriculum, they are sometimes forced to design a program for the whole school. Each school has its own policy. It is therefore significant to search what the institution prioritizes in terms of value. Moreover, the individual effort of each and every teacher is also essential. The timetable and schedule are just a framework for educational reform. Educators need to improve teaching techniques all the time.

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