

Literacy-For What Purpose? PISA, and *Kokugo and Yutori Kyoiku* Reform

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Abstract

This article looks behind the decline in Japanese student performance in Reading Literacy and comprehension on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests, which is frequently blamed on the changes wrought in the teaching of the National Language, or *Kokugo* by the “Relaxed Education” system, or *Yutori Kyoiku* in the years after 2000. While it is true that student performance has declined, this paper suggests that the fault is not necessarily one of lowered standards in *Kokugo*, but instead is because PISA and *Kokugo* have different educational and cultural goals, which are mutually incompatible. PISA measures students’ abilities to analyze and critique a piece of literature, something that does not accord with the goal of *Kokugo*, which is to produce literate Japanese citizens who will be effective participants within the parameters of Japanese society. The purpose of “analysis” of a text within the *Kokugo* curriculum is not to critique a piece of literature, but instead to reach a consensus that will accord with the teacher’s, the curriculum’s, and the national agenda. Although *Yutori Kyoiku* has been instituted in a piece-meal, rather haphazard manner, it is not the cause of the decline in student performance on an international examination that has different goals than the national curriculum.

Key Words: Educational Reform (教育改革), “Relaxed Education” (ゆとり教育), Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) Test (国際学習到達度調査), Reading Literacy (読解力), Declining Scholastic Ability (学力低下)

Educational reform is an issue fraught with tension and controversy, as well it should be, since it sets the parameters not only for an individual’s future, but also for a generation’s

contributions to their society. In earlier historical research, I have investigated how changes in educational policy, and ideas of what constituted a proper role for women in society during the Meiji period, affected the curriculum of Ferris Seminary during the 1880's, leading to more emphasis on producing women who could be accomplished "good wives and wise mothers" (*ryosai kenbo*).¹ Further, the Japanese educational system as a whole has weathered numerous reforms, the most extensive taking place during the Allied military occupation of Japan after the losses of World War II.

I . The Genesis of the Paper

This paper, a departure from my traditional work with American women missionaries involved in educational work in Japan, grew out of extensive discussions over the years as my own children attended Japanese public schools, both before and after the reforms instituted under the rubric of "Relaxed Education." The concerns with literature grow out of my own earlier training in the unusual inter-disciplinary concentration offered by Harvard University in History and Literature, often seen, in these post-structuralist days as mutually exclusive. The concerns over testing goals grew out of my own increased involvement in the world of standardized and non-standardized testing and its relation to entering diverse university systems including those of American, Welsh, and Japanese societies. It is a change in research direction, but a welcome one, for it does no good to become mired in past concerns while the world changes rapidly around you.

II . The "Problem" of *Yutori Kyoiku*: The Charges

In Japan, recently, educators at all levels have bemoaned the effects of changes brought about by the "Relaxed Education" system, or *Yutori Kyoiku*, particularly in the areas of mathematics, science, and most frightening to many, literacy and competence within the national language. Those seeking a perspective of Japan's standing outside its own borders also point to Japan's decreased Reading Literacy and Comprehension scores on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. However, before a wholesale condemnation can be laid at the door of *Yutori Kyoiku*, it is important to delineate the different purposes to which education can be directed. What factors involving the educational or cultural goals of literature instruction in Japan might also contribute to the relative poor performance of Japanese students in Reading Literacy compared to other subjects? This paper is an initial consideration of what some of these factors might be.

As a historian, I am well aware that Japanese secondary school textbooks have been the focus of international controversy for some time, particularly in regard to their content on specific issues regarding Japan's actions before and during World War Two, especially vis-a-vis Japanese actions in China and Korea. Less global attention, however, has been paid to the vociferous and heated debate over textbooks in the domestic sphere, characterized with the ominous phrase of "declining scholastic ability", or *gakuryoku teika*. To begin with, we must acknowledge that this is not a purely modern complaint. We can find references to concern over the abilities of the forthcoming generation all the way back in the Egyptian and Greek worlds.

However, this is a matter of pressing concern in the educational world of Japan today. Scholars, bureaucrats, politicians and writers have voiced their various opinions about whether the changes in the Japanese compulsory education curriculum from 2000 to 2002, or more succinctly, the institution of "Relaxed Education" are to blame for a perceived decline in the performance of Japanese students. Although much can be debated about the causal effects *Yutori Kyoiku* has had in various subject areas, the condemnation against 'watered-down' textbooks has been the most pervasive and significant criticism in the subject area of *Kokugo*, best translated as "National Language", not "Japanese," as many foreigners might initially assume. A decline in Japanese students' 'literary comprehension' performance in the PISA sparked wide-spread distress over the failing academic achievements of contemporary Japanese students, and led to charges that Japan was declining as an academic power, as well as declining as an economic power, on the world stage.² In addition to blaming the reduction in total hours of instruction, critics lamented the loss of academic integrity of *Kokugo*, focusing in on the fact that *Yutori Kyoiku* initiated the movement away from the use of regularly-appearing texts (*teiban kyozaï*).

III. *Yutori Kyoiku*: The Changes

However, it is my contention that this is a specious argument, because the types of texts in *Kokugo* textbooks have little to do with the decline in Japanese students' literary comprehension skills as they are assessed by the PISA. The *Kokugo* curriculum itself is composed of many layers of ideology that have little, if anything, to do with fostering literary criticism. However, *Yutori Kyoiku* can be argued to have failed because it has led to an overall

decline in academic achievement in both domestic and international assessment criteria, and it is over the domestic failure that the most concern is voiced.

Yutori Kyoiku is often translated as ‘relaxed education’, but a more precise translation would show that it was an attempt to shift the focus of the Japanese educational system. From the historical perspective, the old standardized educational curriculum created a productive, homogenous work force who, as an added benefit, shared a national identity, which all became part of a necessary mindset during rapid economic growth. *Yutori Kyoiku*, on the other hand, attempted to nurture student creativity and individuality by “relaxing” the macro-level control over content and instruction.³ The crux of the debate, therefore, is how comprehensive these changes were, and the ‘failure’ of *Yutori Kyoiku* lies in the fact that the changes were piece-meal, haphazard and limited in scope. They were not part of a large-scale overhaul of the educational system, and thus came into conflict with structural and cultural vestiges of a fundamental approach to education. Let us, over the next few pages, review the previous standards for Japanese education.

The first layer of standardization in Japanese education is the document named “Policies for Instruction” (*gakushu shido yoryo*), and is mandated by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, (MEXT). These are provided to all public elementary, junior and senior high schools in Japan, and outline the expected attainment in each subject.⁴ These documents, first published in 1947, under what was then called the Ministry of Education, using the United States’ Course of Study as a model, are legally binding over schools in terms of both quantitative and qualitative aspects of instruction. The Central Council for Education, a committee within MEXT was given the primary role of advising the Minister of Education based on research and policy formation.⁵

The format of “Policies for Instruction” includes a qualitative macro-level goal for each level of schooling (elementary, junior and senior high school), with each subject having its own detailed objectives that follow. Revisions take place every ten years or so, with the most recent being those levied in 2002, as part of *Yutori Kyoiku*.⁶

IV. *Yutori Kyoiku*: What is “Normative”?

Several factors led to these recent changes, one being the high rate of “classroom col-

lapse” or *gakkyu hokai*, a phenomenon akin to a class-wide mutiny, commonly resulting from the teacher’s inability to cope with student delinquency. This deviant and raucous behavior was interpreted as a sign that children were suffering from too much pressure to reach the standardized criteria of successful accomplishment. It was posited that this pressure, and the inability to successfully accomplish the criteria led to a sense of failure, or personal incompetency over not being able to keep up with materials and pace that had been deemed ‘normal’.⁷

But what is “normal?” It is a mutable concept that changes with history, and is dependent upon societal agreement of what should be considered normative. In Japan, there has been a traditional and historical appeal to a cultural argument which is dependent upon a concept of “Japanese-ness”, or so called *Nihonjin-ron*. This argument is usually deemed by the rest of the scholarly world to be inadequate in terms of evidence; there is something to be said for Doi Takeo’s well-known notion of Japan as an “effort society”, or *doryoku shakai*, that is, a society in which effort is valued more than success.⁸

However, this egalitarian hierarchy of values is complicated by the general expectation that the level of success is directly proportional to the amount of effort expended. The result is that a lack of success is associated with inadequate effort, demonstrating that the two parameters are not mutually exclusive after all. Furthermore, in a society that values hard work and effort, the lack of these is more stigmatizing than the lack of success. I only consider this phenomenon here to show that these social norms are rooted in the Japanese educational experience as well. The extent of standardization in the Japanese educational system yields students molded with the same social ideology, where standardization creates the assumption of a homogenous learning ability—since everyone experiences the same curriculum from grades one through nine, it would be a natural assumption that anyone falling behind was doing so because of a lack in effort.

The institution of “relaxed education” was further directed against a long-time criticism of traditional’ Japanese school curriculum (that is, the pre-*Yutori* educational curriculum), namely that it was heavily focused on memorizing countless facts with little room for originality or creativity. The Ministry of Education mandated the framework of achievement goal for each grade, and materials, methods of teaching, and instruction pace all tended to follow

the same standardized model. Students who, for various reasons, could not keep up with the material or pace were often left behind, and frequently condemned for simply not working hard enough. Thus, the objective of *Yutori Kyoiku* was to make schools and teachers more forgiving, in the sense that instruction would accommodate differences in students' learning pace, which, in turn, would guarantee that all students achieve the minimum expectations of the curricula.

One of the major changes mandated by *Yutori Kyoiku* was a reduction in course hours in all levels of schools. For elementary schools, math and science content decreased 25 percent and 24.7 percent, respectively; and in junior high these numbers were 34 percent and 26 percent. Overall, the average reduction in content for all subjects was approximately 30 percent. In high school, the minimum number of credits for graduation decreased from 38 credits to 31, although there were added opportunities for students to take more elective courses. MEXT outlines this new goal as fostering "comprehensive learning ability", whereby students develop "the ability to learn and think independently by and for oneself."⁹ The hours that were opened up were meant to be used to facilitate these goals by being filled with more electives, experience-based studies, group work, and multi-paced teaching tailored to students' differing abilities.

Still, a decrease in total hours spent on material meant that some pre-existing material needed to be eliminated, and thus, one may conclude, resulted in a decrease in the material covered. Indeed, the lower scores of Japanese students on the PISA in 2006 served to confirm, and heighten this anxiety. The PISA, conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) every three years, assesses the academic achievement levels of 15 year olds in the principal industrialized countries (roughly 28 countries).¹⁰

This was true in Mathematics, where Japanese students position dropped from 1st place to 10th between 2000 and 2006. In 2006, the greatest public outcry was over the fact that Japan's global rank in Reading Literacy decreased from 8th to 14th place from 2000.¹¹ Critics, the media, and conservative speakers blamed the curriculum guidelines of *Yutori Kyoiku*, and criticisms of the watered-down textbooks soon followed.

V. Different Tests — Different Goals

However, the issue of Reading Literacy goes beyond the reduced coverage of material, since the tests assess students' abilities to summarize, digest, and critique the information given by the text. Since the Japanese education system has often been criticized for a focus on memorization, it is possible to think that a more flexible curriculum set forth by *Yutori Kyoiku* would help raise the PISA scores of Japanese students. However, this was not the case. The suggestion that PISA scores could be raised by “Relaxed Education” in fact, points to the a major difference between *Kokugo* education in Japan and other language/literature courses in a global context. The OECD states that the Reading Literacy component of the PISA “assesses how far students near the end of compulsory education have acquired some of the knowledge and skills essential for full participation in society.”¹²

On initial reading, the National Curriculum Guidelines of compulsory education in Japan appear to have the same objectives as the OECD. However, it is imperative to remember that the requirements for ‘full participation’ in *Japanese* society are different from a Eurocentric ‘participation’ implied by the OECD. By definition, *Kokugo* is the instruction of *national* language, and in the case of Japanese, much of its use is solely within Japanese society. The objectives of *Kokugo* are to produce a citizen and worker who will be an effective participant within the parameters of Japanese society. Thus, despite the rhetoric of flexibility in *Yutori Kyoiku*, much of the fundamental nationalist ideologies that propel *Kokugo* instruction remain rigid in reality, and instead of becoming the focal point for change, they make the rhetoric of flexibility superficial and ineffective.

Let us look more closely, for example, at literature instruction in *Kokugo*, which tends to focus on a more passive approach to literature, rather than fostering an active literary criticism. Although active discussion and thinking is encouraged, as often praised by western analysts of the Japanese classroom, the ideologies drawn from these texts are predetermined, at least roughly, by the curriculum. Students are encouraged to ‘debate’, but it is for the purpose of reaching a consensus—a consensus that accords with the teacher’s, and moreover the curriculum’s, agenda.¹³

Furthermore, because students are used to reading a text and taking some form of moral

teaching away from it, the “active” mode of students takes the form of a search for the “correct” themes and meaning, rather than employing critical thinking skills. Therefore, what the PISA defines as Reading Literacy; “understanding, using and reflecting on written information for a variety of purposes”,¹⁴ simply is not the same as what the *Kokugo* curriculum guidelines define as successful literacy. As of 1989, the junior high *Kokugo*, emphasized the need for textbooks to achieve the following:

- 1) Deepen understanding and interest in linguistic culture, and foster a respect for *Kokugo*.
- 2) Heighten linguistic senses by strengthen thinking abilities and deepening emotions.
- 3) Foster creativity and an ability to be decisive.
- 4) Enrich their humanity by thinking about life, and develop a strong will to live their daily lives.
- 5) Be helpful in deepening their perceptions by being exposed to social and natural phenomenon?
- 6) Deepen interests in our country’s culture and tradition, and work to develop a respectful attitude towards them.
- 7) Foster an identity as being Japanese within cooperative international relations.¹⁵

As these policies are under constant revision and debate, the wording seems to be carefully constructed; it must convey the expectations clearly without being so specific that they appear controversially censorious.

VI. Textbooks: Who shall they read?

It is possible that the drop in Japanese achievement from 2000 to 2006 may be due to an overall relaxation in educational rigor, but why are Japanese students generally unaccomplished in the PISA Literary Comprehension assessment? The answer lies in the state of semi-standardization that continues to be present in the most crucial material of Japanese schools—the textbook. Like most aspects of compulsory education in Japan, textbooks are standardized through a selection process called Textbook Assessment, or *Kyokayotosho kentei*. The acceptable criteria are outlined in “Principles for Textbook Assessment,” (*Kyokasho Kenteikijun*), published by MEXT. In addition to a focus on accuracy, these guidelines stipulate that textbook material must not be biased in political, religious or ideology.¹⁶ A ‘neutral’ text, therefore, is implied to be ideal. However, as is obvious, there is no such

thing as a ‘neutral’ text, and even if there were, there would be little merit in utilizing it in a literature course. In other words, the texts need to be ‘appropriate’ in content.

Thus, textbook publishers are compelled to avoid literature that includes anything that can potentially lead to controversy. This has meant that even though several textbook companies exist throughout Japan, the texts used by each company tend to have the same content for the literature component. Known as “Regular Materials,” (*teiban kyozai*), these texts are ‘safe’ because they have always been approved in textbooks. However, recently they have become the focus of debate as to whether they promote or hinder students’ literary skill. Moreover, in terms of *Yutori Kyoiku*, the textbook screening process undermines the objectives of individualized teaching, as they define, if not the standard, the lower bound of expectations.

Starting in 2005, textbook publishing companies seemed to take these criticisms on board, and moved away from the traditional literature pieces that were always guaranteed to appear in textbooks. In March 2007, *Asahi Shinbun* ran its annual report on the results of textbooks that passed the selection process under the title “A Turnover of Regular Texts” and “Drastic Decrease in Showa Writers”. The article argued that textbooks were “greatly” moving away from their “austere reputation”. From what follows, “austere” authors included the “great authors of Showa”. Based on a continuous list of *Kokugo* textbook contents by Anno Izumi, a teacher at Tomioka Senior High School in Yokohama, the article outlined how, starting in the 1990s, great authors like Ogawa Kunio, Tanizawa Jun’ichiro and Yasuoka Shotaro ‘disappeared’ from senior high school textbooks in favor of late-Showa and early-Heisei women authors such as Yoshimoto Banana and Eguni Kaori, although Soseki Natsume’s “*Kokoro*” and Mori Ogai’s “*Maihime*” still appear in most approved textbooks.¹⁷

Although the article is ostensibly neutral, the overall tone seems to imply a sense of relief that Soseki and Ogai, at least, have remained in textbooks. Similarly, an interesting comment by Anno implies that the article, overall, is a lament for the “loss” of these authors. Anno notes that “(T)he Showa authors will continue to decrease as they remain in between those regular texts (such as Soseki and Ogai) and modern authors.” Juxtaposed to an adjacent article about English textbook material, also commenting on the focus on “modernity”, this is an interesting comment that underscores the position of *Kokugo* within the Japanese

educational experience. In light of the decrease in the appearance of figures such as Mother Theresa, a spokesperson from Bun'eido Company, one of the publishers of senior high school English textbooks, comments that using the same text over and over again is “boring even for the teachers”, and furthermore, the inclusion of these texts tended to be for the purpose of fostering “morality over interest”.¹⁸

Such comments do not appear in the discussion of *teiban kyozai* in *Kokugo* textbooks. In fact, Anno comments that the shift to modern authors from Showa authors will be detrimental to the “modern child’s appreciation of the historical background [of Japan]”.¹⁹ What is implied here is that these Showa texts provide a certain moral education, arguably akin to Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King Jr. in English textbooks. It is interesting that modern English textbooks are commended for focusing on the contemporary trend, while similar changes in *Kokugo* textbooks are met with conservative caution.

VII. Textbooks: How shall they read?

However, there is a reason for this divergence of opinion between literature in the national language, and content in a foreign language. As specified in the National Curriculum Guidelines above, the objective of *Kokugo* is to “deepen interests in our country’s culture and tradition”. Thus, at least in public perception, *Kokugo* is held at a higher standard than English language instruction, as both the language and literature component aim to serve the eminent purpose of fostering Japanese identity. Furthermore, Ishihara Chiaki, a prominent critic of Japanese *Kokugo* textbooks points out that the censoring of literary content in terms of appropriateness is still present. He refutes the claim that the inclusion of Yoshimoto Banana’s “*Midori no Yubi*”, in ten volumes of high school *Kokugo* textbooks (as of 2007) was a progressive step, since he believes that this work is a “non-hazardous Yoshimoto Banana,” apparently referring to the lack of surrealism, sexuality or violence associated with much of her work. He suggests that *Kokugo* literature, therefore, continues to focus on delivering received ideas of morality and ethics to students rather than developing critical thinking skills and independent thought.²⁰

Indeed, even with the newly outlined National Curriculum Guidelines, *Kokugo* texts continue to avoid controversial issues, which might expose students to different perspectives and ideas, and potentially aid critical thinking abilities. Ishihara states that *Kokugo* is funda-

mentally “moral education”, (*dotoku kyoiku*), emphasizing the inclusion of peace texts, (*heiwa kyozaï*). Outlining several examples of the ‘regularly appeared’ peace texts, Ishihara states an obvious point that these texts serve as pacifist ideological instruction. However, the fact is that *Kokugo* textbooks attempt to make students read them as literature, and even include reading manuals such as *gakushu no tebiki* to assist students to distance themselves from the material and create a critical approach. However, as Ishihara demonstrates by listing the “regularly appearing peace texts,” most of the texts that deal with World War Two are first person narratives, often children, that highlight the suffering of Japanese citizens in a painfully poignant manner, making it difficult to read anything other than an anti-war thread.²¹

Similarly, and not just in these peace-texts, *Kokugo* education emphasizes absolutism: that is, students are to decode ideas and themes imbedded in the texts, which are predetermined by the curriculum. Furthermore, since the same texts are used over and over again, these orthodox interpretations prevail as the norm, and obtaining successful grades in *Kokugo* and moreover, the entrance exams to high school and university, depend on a student's ability to sense these “correct” interpretations.

In their defense, *Kokugo* specialists caution against encouraging relativism, or what is widely called “anything goes”, or *nandemoari*, in interpreting Japanese literature. Sugai Senri, a professor of Japanese literature and *Kokugo* Education at Yamanashi University, states that “*nandemoari*” developed in Japan as a deviant form of post-structuralism. Post-structuralism defines that the ‘intentions’ of the author are secondary to the interpretations by the reader, who reflects upon the text based on his or her personal identity. Sugai believes the Japanese literary critics failed to address the fundamental basis of focusing on the text, and thus contributed to a chaotic phenomenon where post-structuralism was taken as an excuse to elicit any kind of conclusion or meaning the reader wished. Thus, *Kokugo*, the beginning stage of literary experience for most Japanese people, attempts to discourage arbitrary readings of the texts, and the use of *teiban kyozaï* therefore makes sense for the formation of Japanese citizens.²²

However, even outside of the official textbook publications, these ‘classics’ continue to be viewed as must-reads for students for their ideological value. In 2003, *Shogakkan* published a collection of *Kokugo* materials compiled by Nagao Hideaki, a professor at Rikkyo

University and editor of junior and senior high school *Kokugo* textbooks. Titled, “Texts that transcend generations: the exclusive *Kokugo* Textbook”, the text includes “*Kokoro*”, “*Rashomon*” and “*Hashire Merosu*” in its ‘Must-read literature’ chapters. Although Nagao includes some deep analysis of the text in the margins, they are the typical criticism of ego-tism and deceit as taught in *Kokugo* class. Moreover, the overall concept of the book has a feeling of nostalgia, of *natsukashii*, and a desire to preserve these traditional texts in mainstream Japanese education. Again, it seems that the resistance to changing materials stems from a fear of losing one’s “identity as a Japanese”, more than a concern over a decrease in Reading Literacy scores on a global level.²³

VIII. PISA: Reading an International Test with Domestic Skills

Unlike the critical thinking skills that are assessed by PISA Literature and Reading, *Kokugo* education develops a different form of ‘active reading’. *Kokugo* entrance exam questions for both high school and college focus on a student’s ability to decode the text, not critique it. Questions are multiple choice, and usually require students to choose a sentence that most accurately describes the overall ‘message’ of the author. Another form of question asks students to pick out the “first and last three characters” of an area in the text that evidences a particular point the author makes. With such constrained preparation, it is obvious that Japanese students do poorly on PISA questions that require true critical thinking. These questions are usually in the form of a set of arguments, and after preliminary questions directed as gathering and processing information, the final question requires students to choose a side of an argument and explain their choice with their own words. When presented with such questions, the rate of blank answers by Japanese students was 42 percent; much greater than the average of 27 percent.²⁴

The moral component within *Kokugo* instruction is another reason for Japanese students’ poor performance on the PISA tests, Ishihara asserts. When students *do* go further than summarizing the main points of a text, they tend to look for a “moral teaching”. This too opposes one of the crucial skills that the PISA demands: to be able to understand the purpose of a text. Some questions in the Reading Literacy test ask the ‘purpose’ of an article; students are given several choices, usually from A to D, to choose from. For example, an article outlined a crime solved using DNA analysis, with a question inquiring whether the purpose of the text was to:

- A) to warn,
- B) to entertain,
- C) to inform, or
- D) to convince.

The answer was C, but 30 percent of Japanese students answered D, to convince. Thus, students were reading more deeply into the meaning of the text, although they were not required to do so.²⁵

Perhaps this is because *Kokugo* textbooks include a separate section of ‘Critique’, whereby students read short essays of criticisms of social issues. Nevertheless, because of the style of learning developed within Japanese school systems, students engage with these texts in a similar manner, doing passive reading. Unlike the literature component, these texts appear to have more fluidity, and maintain consistency with contemporary social problems. When engaging with these materials, students could theoretically evaluate the author’s claims, but as with the literature, that is not the case.

This begs the question as to whether the ‘watered-down’ textbooks that have excluded ‘difficult’ or ‘austere’ literature can be blamed for the poor performance of Japanese students, domestically and on international tests. It is clear that *Kokugo* education, both pre and post-*Yutori Kyoiku* policies, was ill suited to teaching students skills to score highly on the PISA tests. A closer look at the value of ‘traditional’ literature in *Kokugo* seems to suggest otherwise. In an opinion article in the *Asahi Shinbun* (2000), Kitazawa Shigeyuki, a teacher at a local high school in Gifu, reflects on the need to focus more on the literature component of *Kokugo*. He reflects on a shared experience among his classmates in high school in discussing *Kokoro*. Although his opinion was in response to the delinquency of the average ‘modern youngster,’ his nostalgia speaks of the extent to which this concept of a ‘shared experience across generations’ permeates Japan.²⁶ The regular-texts thus serve this purpose of uniting people under a common experience, particularly because students of every generation retrieve the same general themes from these texts.

VIII. *Yutori Kyoiku*: Relaxation for whom?

The benefits of having a shared experience with national literature reach beyond national unity into pragmatism. Using traditional texts serves to ease the stress and workload of

teachers who are under considerable pressure to assist students in their preparation for entrance exams in to high school and university. “Regular Material” texts are economically and educationally beneficial because the teacher has learned the same material as a student, and teaches the same text over and over again each year. Instead of leading to a deeper communication and evaluation of the text, however, it gives the instructor ‘*yutori (relaxation)*’ in lesson planning by becoming one less issue to think about. Thus it can be seen that the macro-level structure of entrance exams hinders any progress that can be made by shuffling the texts used. As stated previously, the nature of entrance exams in Japan does not require students to draw upon examples from their own reading of and individualistic encounters with literature in their responses. In fact, despite the heated debates in the public sphere, literature can often be overlooked within the classroom, as the texts are not directly relevant to success in entrance exams, thus pointing to the fact that debates over *Kokugo* instruction have less relevance to student performance than they have to the face of literature instruction in Japan in relation to a global context.

IX. Reading Comprehension and Literary Criticism: The Ideological Conundrum

In conclusion, *Yutori Kyoiku* attempted to change the methods of learning without restructuring the ideological framework of *Kokugo* education, which exalts a passive participation in literature. Because *Kokugo* education blends literature, language and national identity, it fails to develop critical comprehension, a skill often assessed in international literacy tests. What *Yutori Kyoiku*, and the resultant decline in Japanese literacy achievements in the PISA test did do was painfully highlight the incompatibility of *Kokugo*-defined “literary comprehension” to the international (or perhaps ‘western’) concept of the same issue. To be clear, *Yutori Kyoiku* did not necessarily denote a ‘decline’ in academic ability in terms of domestic criteria, but instead aggravated the fundamental difference in these perspectives of literacy between Japan and other OECD countries. After analyzing the domestic debates over *Yutori Kyoiku* and the recent PISA ranking of Japanese students, it appears that at the core of the debates over which texts to include in texts, there is an underlying contradiction about Japan’s position in an ever expanding globalization. On the one hand, many Japanese feel the need for Japan to become more ‘globally oriented’, but on the other hand, in doing so, there is much anxiety over losing a national Japanese identity. In this sense, *Kokugo* will continue to be a focal point for debate because it has traditionally been the fundamental basis of this national identity.

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Endnotes

- ¹ Novick, Pamela Lee. “Joshi Mission School no vision — Ferisu Jogakko (1870–1890),” translated by Oyama Tsunao. *The Kirisutoykyo-Shigaku*, vol. 48, pp. 78–83.
- ² <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/struct/014.htm>, According to the results of an international survey of academic ability released in December 2004, the academic ability of Japanese children is in a declining trend.
- ³ “Yutori Kyoiku.” *Nihon Daihyakka Zensho*. Japan Knowledge Plus, <<http://www.japanknowledge.com>>. supplemented by English translation found at <<http://www.mext.go.jp/english/org/struct/014.htm>>.
- ⁴ see the MEXT English translation at http://www.mext.go.jp/component/a_menu/education/micro_detail/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2009/04/21/1261037_2.pdf.
- ⁵ see “Gakushu Shido Yoryo.” *Nihon Kokugo Daijiten*. Japan Knowledge Plus, <<http://www.japanknowledge.com>>.
- ⁶ Several minor changes were made in 2005, which attempt to clarify ambiguities within the guidelines, mainly involved rephrasing and omitting concepts that were inconsistent with other changes instituted in 2002.
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