

The Analysis of Junior High School Textbooks with a Focus on Tasks

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Abstract

This study is to clarify the quality of English textbooks from the point of view of communication. In Japan, the curriculum for junior high school English was revised in 2008. Subsequently, English textbooks were also revised in 2012 according to the guidelines of the new curriculum. The new curriculum puts more importance on communicative activities. We adopted task analysis to examine the quality of English textbooks. We analyzed the most popular English textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan: *New Horizon English Course*. To assess the quality of tasks in the textbooks, we adopted the model developed by Kawai, Hirata, Arai, Yokoyama, and Ohba (2002), following Skehan (1998). The three scales used are distribution, interactional requirement and goal openness. The objectives of this study are (1) to analyze Book1 to Book3 with a focus on the quality of tasks and (2) to compare previous English textbooks with new versions. As a result, there are no significant differences in quality among the new version English textbooks in terms of the three categories, and significant differences only between the new version Book1 and its old version in terms of goal openness.

Keywords

English textbooks, tasks, communication ability

1 Introduction

In Japan the curriculum for Japanese junior high school English was revised in 2008 and enforced in 2012. Subsequently, English textbooks in junior high schools were also revised in 2012 according to the guidelines of the new curriculum. One of the greatest differences between the old and the new curricula is the emphasis on communication. The new curriculum puts more importance on communicative activities. With regard to language activities, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology-Japan (MEXT) (2008a) state as below in the General Provisions of the new curriculum:

When teaching subjects etc., learning activities that necessitate students to use basic and fundamental knowledge and skills should be emphasized and language activities should be enhanced by way of preparing a solid linguistic environment necessary to deepen the students' understanding of and interest in language and to develop their linguistic abilities, with an aim of fostering the students' ability to think, to judge, to express themselves and so forth (p.4).

Furthermore, MEXT (2008b) state that "activities in which, for example, students actually use language to share their thoughts and feelings with each other should be carried out" (p.3) in Foreign Languages. To share thoughts and feelings with each other is exactly communication and the activities are regarded as communicative activities.

Although communication is a keyword, it is very difficult to examine how communication textbooks are compiled. There have been some worthy attempts to do so (Uenishi, Hosaka, & Akase, 2012). In this study, we adopt task analysis to examine the quality of English textbooks from the point of view of communication.

2 Background

In this section we examine basic communication abilities in the new curriculum and previous research on task analysis in literature review.

2.1 Basic communication abilities

As it is generally accepted that “to develop students’ basic communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages” (MEXT, 2008b: p.1) has been the overall objective of foreign languages, and ‘basic communication abilities’ in the new curriculum can be defined in terms of those four abilities. The new curriculum puts more importance on communicative activities. As for treatment of the language activities in the new curriculum, MEXT (2008b) explains that “activities in which, for example, students actually use language to share their thoughts and feelings with each other should be carried out” (p.3). Such activities are very important for developing students’ basic communication abilities. Since students attempt to communicate, using practical English when doing them, practical communication abilities will be facilitated. Hirata et al. (2008) state that “English teachers have to consider making students improve their communication abilities through language activities” (p.34) and propose an introduction of ‘information gap’ into the activities. They also state that “the information gap is an essential factor for accomplishing communication” (p.38) and students can improve their ability to use English effectively through communication with information gaps.

In the new curriculum, the term ‘language activity’ is used. In this study, we use the alternative term ‘task’, which had been used in a lot of previous studies.

2.2 Previous research on task analysis in Literature Review

Some studies on task analysis have been conducted in Japan. Kawai, Hirata, Arai, Yokoyama, and Ohba (2002) proposed a model to assess pedagogical tasks in English textbooks, following Skehan (1998). Skehan (1998) classified tasks according to their features. The classification is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The classification by Skehan (1998: pp.116-117)

Task	Information	Distribution	symmetric / asymmetric
		Type	concrete / abstract
			immediate / remote
		Organization	-
	Familiarity	-	
	Operations	-	retrieval / transformation
		-	few / many
	Goals	-	arrange / decide vs. interpret
		-	open / closed vs. tight / loose
		-	focused / differentiated
-		convergent / divergent	

His classification has three main categories, which are information, operations and goals. Furthermore he sets up subordinate categories in each main category. Kawai et al. (2002) adopted the three main categories and readjusted the subordinate categories.

Table 2: The model developed by Kawai et al. (2002: p.46)

Tasks	Information	Distribution	Two-way / One-way
		Type	±Concrete
			±Immediate
			±Familiar
	Organization	±Structured	
	Operations	Process	Retrieval / Transformation
		Interactional requirement	±Required
		Elements	Many / Few
	Goals	Open	±Open
		Focused	±Focused

		Convergent	±Convergent
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The subordinate categories that Kawai et al. readjusted are distribution (two-way / one-way), type (±concrete / ±immediate / ±familiar) and organization (±structured) in the category of information, process (retrieval / transformation), interactional requirement (±required) and elements (many / few) in the category of operations, open (±open), focused (±focused) and convergent (±convergent) in the category of goals. Kawai et al. (2002) explain the definitions of these task features. We mention the definitions of distribution in the category of information, interactional requirement in the category of operations and open in the category of goals in detail in the section 4.2. Now we mention the definitions of the other task features briefly. First, we focus on the category of information. According to Kawai et al. (2002), as for type, tasks are assessed according to whether or not “information and topics dealt with in them are concrete” (p.47), whether or not “information and topics dealt with in them are in line with a context of the situation” (p.47), and whether or not “it is expected that learners have knowledge concerning information and topics of tasks” (p.47). As for organization, tasks are assessed according to whether or not “arrangement of information and procedure of processing information are expressed clearly or it is easy for learners to forecast them” (p.47). Second, we focus on the category of operations. According to Kawai et al. (2002), as for process, “tasks which learners retrieve necessary information as they are from information which they get are called retrieval-type task” (p.47) whereas “tasks which learners are required to interpret and transfigure information which they get in order to complete a task are called transformation-type task” (pp.47-48). As for elements, tasks are assessed according to whether or not “there are many necessary information processing elements for completing a task” (p.48). Lastly, we focus on the category of goals. According to Kawai et al. (2002), as for focused, tasks are assessed according to whether or not “final solutions of tasks are concise sentences or numerical and so forth” (p.48). As for convergent, “tasks which learners have common goals and learners are required to reach a consensus of their opinions and so forth, exchanging information that they have are regarded as +convergent” (p.48) whereas “tasks which learners’ goals and positions are not common and learners are required to state their own opinions in different positions are regarded as –convergent” (p.48).

Kawai et al. (2002) analyzed tasks in two textbooks, a Japanese high school textbook for speaking skills and an ESL course book for speaking and listening skills, with the model. The model developed by Kawai et al. is appropriate to assess the quality of tasks in English textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan. Therefore, we decided to apply their model to task analysis from the point of view of communication.

3 Objectives

In this study we clarify the quality of English textbooks from the point of view of communication. In this section we show the objectives of this study in detail.

The objectives of this study are

1. to analyze Book1 to Book3 of new textbooks with a focus on tasks.
2. to compare previous English textbooks with new versions.

By doing this, we clarify the quality of English textbooks.

4 Method

We explain the method in this study, especially focusing on textbooks and tasks to be analyzed and the viewpoint of task analysis.

4.1 Textbooks and tasks to be analyzed

In this study, we analyzed the most popular authorized English textbooks at junior high schools in Japan: *New Horizon English Course* at junior high school in Japan (Book1 to Book3) the new versions and the old versions). There are 6 authorized English textbooks at junior high schools in Japan. The percentage use of *New Horizon English Course* was 33.2% in the 2012 school year.

Table 3: English textbooks we analyzed

Textbooks	Publishing company	Authors	Year (Authorization)	Year (Publishing)
<i>New Horizon English Course 1</i>	Tokyo shoseki	Kasajima et al.	2011	2012
<i>New Horizon English Course 2</i>	Publishing company		2011	2012

<i>New Horizon English Course 3</i>			2011	2012
<i>New Horizon English Course 1</i>	Tokyo shoseki Publishing company	Kasajima et al.	2005	2011
<i>New Horizon English Course 2</i>			2005	2011
<i>New Horizon English Course 3</i>			2005	2011

We need to define a task for selection of target tasks to analyze. A lot of researchers have defined tasks in various ways. For example, Nunan (1989) defined a task as:

a piece of classroom work which involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing, or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form.

The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right (p.10).

Nunan defined a task, focusing on conveying meaning. On the other hand, Prabhu (1987) defined a task as “an activity which required learners to arrive at an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and which allowed teachers to control and regulate that process” (p.24) in a narrow sense. These definitions are not appropriate to select tasks in English textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan because of the narrow sense. Crookes (1986) defined a task in a broad sense as “a piece of work or an activity, usually with a specified objective, undertaken as part of an educational course, at work, or used to elicit data for research” (p.1). In this study, we adopted the Crookes’s definition, which was also adopted in Kawai et al. (2002) and other research. Based on this definition, we selected speaking tasks and communication tasks with speaking as the target tasks for analysis from the point of view of tasks that require more communication with others. Tasks as a kind of drills were excluded from tasks to be analyzed.

4.2 Viewpoint of analysis

To assess the quality of tasks in the textbooks, we modified the model developed by Kawai et al. (2002), following Skehan (1998). We adopted three scales from the model from the point of view of communication. They are distribution in the category of information, interactional requirement in the category of operations and open in the category of goals. As for these scales, we modified how to assess a little. There is no modification in distribution. Kawai et al. (2002) explain that “tasks which a learner who has a part of information and a learner who has the remaining information are created and each of them has both roles of requesting and supplying the information in order to complete a task are regarded as two-way” (p.47) and “tasks which a learner who has information and a learner who doesn’t have any information are created and learners have either role of requesting the information or role of supplying the information in order to complete a task are regarded as one-way” (p.47). As for interactional requirement, we assessed at “required or optional” instead of “±required”. Kawai et al. (2002) explained that “tasks which learners have different information and need to request and supply the information each other in order to complete a task are regarded as +required” (p.48) (required) and “tasks which learners have different information and it is optional for them to request and supply the information in order to complete a task are regarded as -required” (p.48) (optional). As for open, we changed the name of subordinate category from “open” to “goal openness”. We assessed at “open goal or closed goal” instead of “±open”. Kawai et al. (2002) explained that “tasks which their goals or ways of completing the tasks are not restricted are regarded as +open” (p.48) (open goal) and “tasks which their goals or ways of completing the tasks are restricted are regarded as -open” (p.48) (closed goal).

Table 4: The scales used in this study, following Kawai et al. (2002)

Tasks	Information	Distribution	Two-way / One-way
	Operations	Interactional requirement	Required / Optional
	Goals	Goal openness	Open goal / Closed goal

We focused on negotiation of meaning when we chose the scales, distribution in the category of information and goal openness in the category of goals. When Richards and Schmidt (2010) describe Interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), they explain that negotiation of meaning “happens when interlocutors attempt to overcome problems in conveying their meaning, resulting in both additional input and useful feedback on the learner’s own production” (p.290). They also explain that “language acquisition requires or greatly benefits from interaction, communication and especially negotiation of meaning” (p.290) according

to the hypothesis. As for distribution and goal openness, Long (1989) claimed that negotiation works are produced more in two-way tasks and closed tasks.

As for interactional requirement in the category of operations, Pica, Kanagy, and Falodun (1993) state that comprehension of input, feedback on production and interlanguage modification are expected when each interactant is required to request and supply information. Based on this, we also chose interactional requirement as one of the scales.

These findings suggest that English textbooks at junior high schools in Japan require two-way tasks, required interaction tasks and closed goal tasks in order to develop students' basic communication abilities.

5 Results

In this section we present the results of task analysis for the objective 1 (to analyze Book1 to Book3 of new textbooks with a focus on tasks) and the objective 2 (to compare previous English textbooks with new versions).

5.1 Quality of new textbooks

We could have the data of each scale, distribution (Table 5), interactional requirement (Table 6) and goal openness (Table 7) through analyzing tasks in the new version textbooks for objective 1. We employed chi-square test in order to examine significant differences among the textbooks in each scale.

First, as for distribution, it seems that the ratios of two-way tasks are much lower than those of one-way tasks in each textbook. As a result of chi-square test to examine significant differences among the textbooks in terms of the tendency, there are no significant differences among them ($p = .717$). Thus, it can be clear that the ratios of one-way tasks and two-way tasks in each textbook are almost the same.

Table 5: Distribution (The objective 1)

	<i>Two-way</i>	<i>One-way</i>	<i>Total</i>
Book1	9 (20.5%)	35 (79.5%)	44
Book2	5 (15.2%)	28 (84.8%)	33
Book3	4 (13.8%)	25 (86.2%)	29
Total	18 (17.0%)	88 (83.0%)	106

Note: Ratios are shown in parentheses.

Second, as for interactional requirement, it seems that the ratios of required interaction tasks are lower than those of optional interaction tasks in each textbook. As a result of chi-square test to examine significant differences among the textbooks in terms of the tendency, there are no significant differences among the textbooks ($p = .256$). Thus, it is clear that the ratios of required interaction tasks and optional interaction tasks in each textbook are almost the same.

Table 6: Interactional requirement (The objective 1)

	<i>Required</i>	<i>Optional</i>	<i>Total</i>
Book1	9 (20.5%)	35 (79.5%)	44
Book2	10 (30.3%)	23 (69.7%)	33
Book3	11 (37.9%)	18 (62.1%)	29
Total	30 (28.3%)	76 (71.7%)	106

Note: Ratios are shown in parentheses.

Third, as for goal openness, it seems that the ratios of open goal tasks and closed goal tasks are balanced in each textbook. As a result of chi-square test to examine significant differences among the textbooks in terms of the tendency, there are no significant differences among the textbooks ($p = .979$). Thus, it can be clear that the ratios of open goal tasks and closed goal tasks in each textbook are almost the same.

Table 7: Goal openness (The objective 1)

	<i>Open goal</i>	<i>Closed goal</i>	<i>Total</i>
Book1	19 (43.2%)	25 (56.8%)	44
Book2	15 (45.5%)	18 (54.5%)	33
Book3	13 (44.8%)	16 (55.2%)	29

Total	47 (45.3%)	59 (54.7%)	106
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Note: Ratios are shown in parentheses.

5.2 Comparison

We were able to obtain data for each scale, distribution (Table 8), interactional requirement (Table 9) and goal openness (Table 10) through analyzing tasks in the new version textbooks and their old versions for objective 2. We employed Fisher's exact test in order to examine the relevance between the new version textbooks, the old version ones and the scales.

First, as for distribution, it seems that the ratios of two-way tasks are much lower than those of one-way tasks in each year Book. The tendency is seen in both the new version textbooks and the old version ones. As a result of Fisher's exact test in terms of this tendency, there are no significant differences between the new version Book1 and the old version Book1 ($p = .577$). There are no significant differences between the new version Book2 and the old version Book2 ($p = .313$). There are no significant differences between the new version Book3 and the old version Book3 ($p = .107$). Thus, it is clear that the ratios of two-way tasks are much lower than those of one-way tasks in each year Book. This tendency can be seen in both new version textbooks and the old version textbooks.

Table 8: Distribution (The objective 2)

	<i>Two-way</i>	<i>One-way</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>p</i>
New Book1	9 (20.5%)	35 (79.5%)	44	.577
Old Book1	7 (21.2%)	26 (78.8%)	33	
New Book2	5 (15.2%)	28 (84.8%)	33	.313
Old Book2	9 (22.5%)	31 (77.5%)	40	
New Book3	4 (13.8%)	25 (86.2%)	29	.107
Old Book3	11 (29.7%)	26 (70.3%)	37	

Note: Ratios are shown in parentheses.

Second, with regard to interactional requirement, it seems that the ratios of required interaction tasks are lower than those of optional interaction tasks in each year Book. This tendency is seen in both the new version textbooks and the old versions. As a result of Fisher's exact test in terms of this tendency, there are no significant differences between the new version Book1 and the old version Book1 ($p = .520$). There are no significant differences between the new version Book2 and the old version Book2 ($p = .403$). There are no significant differences between the new version Book3 and the old version Book3 ($p = .249$). Thus, it is clear that the ratios of required interaction tasks are lower than that of optional interaction tasks in each year Book. This tendency can be seen in both new version textbooks and the old version textbooks.

Table 9: Interactional requirement (The objective 2)

	<i>Required</i>	<i>Optional</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>p</i>
New Book1	9 (20.5%)	35 (79.5%)	44	.520
Old Book1	6 (18.2%)	27 (81.8%)	33	
New Book2	10 (30.3%)	23 (69.7%)	33	.403
Old Book2	10 (25.0%)	30 (75.0%)	40	
New Book3	11 (37.9%)	18 (62.1%)	29	.249
Old Book3	10 (27.0%)	27 (73.0%)	37	

Note: Ratios are shown in parentheses.

Third, as for goal openness, it seems that the ratios of open goal tasks and closed goal tasks are balanced in the new version Book2, the old version Book2, the new version Book3 and the old version Book3. But it seems that the ratio of open goal tasks is lower than that of closed goal tasks in the new version Book1, whereas the ratio of open goal tasks is higher than that of closed goal tasks in the old version Book1. As a result of Fisher's exact test in terms of these tendencies, there are significant differences only between the new version Book1 and the old version Book1 ($p = .034$). There are no significant differences between the new version Book2 and the old version Book2 ($p = .358$). There are no significant differences between the new version Book3 and the old version Book3 ($p = .310$). Thus, it is clear that the ratio of closed goal tasks is higher than that of open goal tasks in the new version Book1, whereas the ratio of open goal tasks is higher

than that of closed goal tasks in the old version Book1. Besides, it is clear that the ratios of open goal tasks and closed goal tasks are balanced in the new version Book2, the old version Book2, the new version Book3 and the old version Book3.

Table 10: Goal openness (The objective 2)

	<i>Open goal</i>	<i>Closed goal</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>p</i>
New Book1	19 (43.2%)	25 (56.8%)	44	.034
Old Book1	22 (66.7%)	11 (33.3%)	33	
New Book2	15 (45.5%)	18 (54.5%)	33	.358
Old Book2	21 (52.5%)	19 (47.5%)	40	
New Book3	13 (44.8%)	16 (55.2%)	29	.310
Old Book3	20 (54.1%)	17 (45.9%)	37	

Note: Ratios are shown in parentheses.

6 Discussions

Based on these results, we discuss the quality of English textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan in terms of the objective 1 (to analyze Book1 to Book3 of new textbooks with a focus on tasks) and the objective 2 (to compare previous English textbooks with new versions).

6.1 Quality of new textbooks

As for the quality of tasks in the new version textbooks, it is clear that the ratios of two-way tasks and required interaction tasks, which are important for developing students' basic communication abilities, are lower. There are a lot of one-way tasks and optional interaction tasks in the textbooks and some of them are a kind of exercise. This might be seen as one reason that the ratios of two-way tasks and required interaction tasks are lower.

6.2 Comparison

As for the comparison between the new version textbooks and the old versions, the increase of communication tasks named 'Your Turn' in the new version textbooks could be one of the reasons for the significant differences between the new version Book1 and the old version Book1 in terms of goal openness. There are 19 'Your Turn' exercises, which we regard as tasks to be analyzed in the old version Book1 whereas there are 37 in the new version. The quantitative difference of them between the new version Book1 and the old version is 18. We regarded 16 exercises of them as closed goal tasks. It might be seen as a factor for the significant differences between the new version Book1 and the old version Book1 in terms of goal openness.

Furthermore, it is remarkable that there are no significant differences in distribution and interactional requirement, and also goal openness in Book2 and Book3. With regard to this, we understand that there are few changes between the new version textbooks and the old versions although developing students' basic communication ability is supposed to be the main focus.

7 Conclusion

In this study we analyzed the tasks in English textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan in order to clarify the quality of the textbooks from the point of view of communication. By doing so, we clarified that the ratios of two-way tasks and required interaction tasks, which are important for developing students' basic communication abilities, are lower than those of one-way tasks and optional interaction tasks in the new version textbooks. Also we found out that there are significant differences only between the new version Book1 and the old version Book1 in terms of goal openness, but there are no significant differences in distribution and interactional requirement, and also goal openness in Book2 and Book3. We think that more two-way tasks and required interaction tasks should be introduced in English textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan in order to develop students' basic communication abilities.

Furthermore, we found that the textbooks include speaking tasks and communication tasks as a kind of exercise. Thus, we had some difficulties with analyzing these tasks with the scales we used. Therefore, it is necessary to develop a new definition of tasks and scales for analyzing tasks in textbooks used in junior high schools in Japan. Furthermore, in this study we analyzed only one of the authorized English textbooks.

Further examination of the quality of other five authorized English textbooks is required.

It is very important for English teachers who work at junior high schools in Japan to understand the quality of English textbooks that they use. Moreover, they have to introduce communicative activities into their English classes intentionally and appropriately in order to develop students' basic communication abilities.

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