The treatment of vocabulary in the English language textbooks used in Japanese upper secondary schools

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Abstract

The present study examined the English vocabulary presented in 40 different textbooks used in Japanese upper secondary schools. The study results indicate that there is a tremendous range in what vocabulary is presented. In some textbooks, the number of vocabulary words is more than three times that of others. Based on these findings, English language teachers must carefully determine which textbooks are best matched to the skill level of their learners. In addition to an overview of the treatment of the vocabulary in English language textbooks in Japanese upper secondary schools, this study also describes and analyzes the different aspects of these textbooks that focus on integrating communication skills and vocabulary knowledge. Finally, the study also reveals a gap in the current vocabulary treatment between globally-produced instructional materials and locally-produced English textbooks in Japan. It also proposes some ways to address this issue.

Keywords

English language textbooks, Japanese upper secondary schools, vocabulary treatment

Introduction

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has enhanced English education significantly by strengthening the learners' proficiency of English in Japanese upper secondary schools. Despite the effective implementation of new English education techniques, numerous questions persist, such as "What kinds of English textbooks are used in the Japanese curriculum and are they effective?" Current research on the English language textbooks used to teach English as a foreign language (EFL) has found that the textbooks play a crucial role in motivating and enhancing EFL students' language proficiency (e.g.,

Dorahaki & Riazi, 2014). In addition, the manner in which vocabulary is presented and taught in these textbooks also has a significant influence on how well learners develop their overall English language proficiency (e.g., Schmitt, 2000). The purpose of the present study was to investigate how vocabulary is utilized in the English textbooks currently used in Japanese upper secondary schools.

The Japanese government has deliberated on the amount of English vocabulary taught in upper secondary schools. To meet social expectations, the latest revision of *Course of Study* (MEXT, 2009) restructured the English language course curricula and increased the level of the English taught in these textbooks. More than 26 different types of English textbooks have been approved by MEXT for use in each class of the upper secondary schools. Although there are no criteria for the course syllabi, class standards, or how the teachers present the material (i.e., what vocabulary the students should learn and how to use it), English teachers use their own students' English proficiency to assess the quality of the course materials.

1 Vocabulary treatment in Japanese upper secondary schools

According to the present Course of Study, the English subjects in Japanese upper secondary schools have been revised from 2013. The mandatory vocabulary that must be taught in secondary schools has increased from 900 to 1,200 words in lower secondary schools and from 1,300 to 1,800 words in upper secondary schools. Secondary school students are currently required to master 3,000 vocabulary words.

In respect to teaching materials, textbooks play an important role in learning English vocabulary; however, these textbooks remain one of the most significant and controversial issues in Japan. This controversy emerges from

the fact that English learners in Japan have few opportunities to be exposed to English outside of the classroom. Nation (2013) pointed out that learning vocabulary is an essential aspect of second language acquisition. Therefore, in the Japanese context, the studies on teenagers' vocabulary learning have frequently focused on English textbooks. Some researchers have examined the effectiveness and utility of the English textbook vocabulary used in lower and upper secondary schools. They contend that materials such as the textbook vocabularies should be re-examined and that it is imperative to explore English textbooks and English vocabulary teaching by considering actual language-use situations and the functions of language.

2 Large-scale research for English vocabulary

Although English textbooks in Japan have been the subject of extensive study in recent years, large-scale research regarding English vocabulary has not yet been conducted under the present *Course of Study*. The present study explored the qualitative characteristics of the English language textbooks used in Japanese upper secondary schools and it reexamined the quality of the vocabulary used in those textbooks. The treatment of English vocabulary, especially at the upper secondary school level, is discussed more frequently than the characteristics of the textbooks.

2.1 Method

2.1.1 Materials

Forty English textbooks, all approved by MEXT (2009), were used as materials in this investigation. All of the words that appeared in the main sentences and wordlists were targeted for quantitative analyses.

2.1.2 Data analyses

The quantitative analyses were conducted for the following two types of data: the number of vocabulary words in each of the 40 textbooks and the total number of vocabulary words in 20 textbooks for 10th graders and 20 textbooks for 11th graders. The data was computed using Wordsmith Tools and then analyzed to clarify the statistical and quantitative differences in the vocabularies among the textbooks.

2.2 Results

The features of the English vocabulary used for 10th graders are shown in Table 1. The analyses indicated that the tokens (running words) in each textbook had a wide-range, from 10,248 to 34,734 words. There were between 1,211 and 3,106 types (distinct words). The largest number of tokens was two times larger than the smallest number.

Table 1: *Tokens and types in each textbook*

Textbook	Tokens	Types	Textbook	Tokens	Types
Textbook A	10,248	1,211	Textbook A	13,356	1,419
Textbook B	12,924	1,341	Textbook B	19,605	1,764
Textbook C	12,406	1,382	Textbook C	14,602	1,777
Textbook D	15,165	1,453	Textbook D	12,894	1,861
Textbook E	13,300	1,649	Textbook E	13,919	1,980
Textbook F	11,455	1,675	Textbook F	22,202	2,109
Textbook G	12,789	1,701	Textbook G	24,174	2,121
Textbook H	20,070	1,738	Textbook H	21,135	2,236
Textbook I	16,754	1,794	Textbook I	27,580	2,303
Textbook J	18,203	1,900	Textbook J	26,737	2,367
Textbook K	22,202	1,905	Textbook K	28,668	2,453
Textbook L	19,486	1,928	Textbook L	22,669	2,484
Textbook M	24,373	1,967	Textbook M	20,340	2,519
Textbook N	16,674	2,105	Textbook N	22,479	2,673
Textbook O	26,408	2,294	Textbook O	38,700	2,778
Textbook Q	27,053	2,478	Textbook Q	31,222	2,791
Textbook R	29,936	2,532	Textbook R	31,180	3,058
Textbook S	33,438	2,819	Textbook S	34,995	3,310
Textbook T	33,200	2,855	Textbook T	45,730	3,515
Textbook V	35,088	3,106	Textbook V	42,252	3,878

Note: English textbooks for 10th and 11th graders

3 Conclusion

The results of the quantitative study showed that the textbooks included a large variety of vocabularies and that the number of the largest types in the textbooks was more than three times larger than those of the smallest types. The database should be helpful for teachers as reference data when deciding which textbooks to use in Japan. Moreover, the educators could decide the number of additional vocabularies that should be taught, depending on the needs of their students. Nonetheless, this study contains some limitations, and there is a need to find better methods of collecting the appropriate date. To provide a significant amount of information about vocabulary to students, teachers will be expected to input a significant amount of information about the knowledge of vocabulary and improving their individual teaching skills.

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