



# In-house textbook revision: Finding a balance

Cameron Romney

*Momoyama Gakuin University*

Warren Decker

*Momoyama Gakuin University*

## Reference Data:

Romney, C., & Decker, W. (2007). In-house textbook revision: Finding a balance. In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT 2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

*English Here and Now at Momoyama* is a textbook created at Momoyama Gakuin University to standardize first year compulsory English classes. When revising this textbook, we were faced with a difficult question: How can a textbook revision be true to the intent of the original authors, but also offer substantial improvements? The paper discusses this challenge and shows specific examples of the textbook was revised.

*English Here and Now at Momoyama*は一年時必修の英語クラスを統一するために桃山学院大学が作成した教科書です。この教科書を改訂するにあたり、私たちは難しい問題に直面しました。それは、原作者の意図を受けついでまま、どのように内容ある改良を進めていけるかということです。ここで、この問題について、また具体的改訂例を説明します。

In 2005, we were hired by Momoyama University to be full-time contract lecturers in the Language Center. In addition to our teaching course load we were asked by the center director to revise *English Here and Now at Momoyama*, the standard textbook, published in-house and used by all first year English instructors at the university. We were asked to do this revision independently without the input of the original authors. Some had moved on from the university, some remained, but none were still involved in development of the textbook.

## Background

The Language Center at Momoyama University was created in 2001, principally as a way to unify the English curriculum across all faculties in the university. Prior to the establishment of the Language Center each faculty made its own decisions about what to teach and how to teach it. The original creators decided that one way to ensure consistency was to have all of the classes use the same textbook and to have all students take the same end of semester exam based on the textbook. Thus, *English Here and Now at Momoyama* was written to accomplish this (Carroll & Head, 2003).

Each book, one for the spring semester and one for the fall, contains eight chapters. Each chapter is broken down into an *A* lesson and a *B* lesson. Generally speaking, the *A* lessons are taught by a Japanese teacher of English and the *B* lessons are taught by an Anglophone teacher. The lessons have the same theme and the language study in one builds on the other.

The objectives of the textbook are best summarized by the preface to the first edition. “Firstly it is a communication-based text. Secondly the target aimed at is English in context. ... Thirdly this text follows no learning order of grammatical items or vocabulary” (Toyama, et al., 2005, ii).

## Challenges and constraints

When sitting down to revise the text we were faced with a number of challenges. First and foremost, we felt that the text should be as relevant and communicative as the original authors intended, but still needed to be consistent and practical. Finding a balance between these proved to be quite

difficult, as the text would be used by nearly forty teachers, both Japanese and non-Japanese, part-time, full-time (contract) and tenured, all with different teaching styles and with different beliefs about language learning. Additionally, nearly two thousand students use the book each year and their levels can vary widely, even within the same class. The text needed to be useful for all of these people.

One of the constraints placed on us by the center director was that we couldn’t revise the *A* pages. Because we were both *B* teachers this seemed at first to be an easy request. However, in practical terms it meant that we were unable to change any of the lesson themes. Nor could we change the titles or order of the lessons in the book.

Finally, as we were both new to the university, and new to the project, we were not part of the discussion or process that had brought the textbook to its current state. We were concerned that our changes would offend the previous authors who were still at the university.

## Examples

Here are two specific examples of the textbook revision. We have included these examples to show how we changed the text, in some ways quite dramatically, but still tried to remain true to the objectives of the original authors. The units have been reproduced, both before and after, in the appendices.

### *Example 1: Revision of Unit 2*

Unit 2, a lesson on giving and understanding street directions, a common lesson in ELT materials, focused on a real-life example of a restaurant in the neighborhood of the

campus. We felt that this was an appropriate way to make the English studied by the students real and practical to their lives. However, the lesson itself was quite confusing and difficult.

Firstly, the listening activity lacked any sort of introduction or concrete task. Students should simply listen and read along. After listening, they were asked to identify the location of the restaurant on the map. This seems straight forward enough, but upon closer inspection it is difficult to determine the correct answer. Is it #1 or #3?

We decided to add a pre-listening activity that introduced the students to the language that they needed in order to complete the listening and speaking activities. This was a simple matching activity: match the pictures with their descriptions. We then decided to create a listening task that had the students listen, draw a line and circle the locations described in the recording.

The biggest departure from the original lesson was to change the location. While we felt that using a map of the neighborhood around the campus had the great advantage of being familiar to the students, the confusing layout of the town added unneeded complications to the lesson. Instead we chose to set the lesson in the Shinsaibashi area of Osaka. This area, one of the oldest and most famous of Osaka, is laid out in a grid pattern, which greatly simplified matters. The majority of the students have been to this area of Osaka—many of them work there—so it is familiar to them. Furthermore, this allowed the activity to have a greater variety.

The original speaking activity asked the students to describe how to get to a location that they were familiar

with. Their partner should listen and draw a map. However, this is a difficult task to complete in their native language, let alone in the target language. Furthermore, it was often the case that the student who was listening and drawing a map was not familiar with the area being described by the other student and was unable to complete the task.

Instead, we asked the students to describe how to get to one of their favorite places in Shinsaibashi. By setting the activity in a place that the majority of students were familiar with, that wasn't too difficult, we were able to increase the interest and success of the students with this unit and, although the changes were quite a radical departure from the original lesson, it does retain the basic idea of having the students listen to and give directions in a real place that they are familiar with.

### *Example 2: Revision of Unit 6*

In unit 6 we made several changes, always trying to preserve the original objectives, but doing so with tasks that were more concrete and focused for students of all levels.

In the listening section we simply took the same basic task and made it more concrete. The original version was too difficult for students, or even teachers to complete. In the updated format, students only have to match letters to the numbers, instead of drawing a picture.

We made more substantial changes to the speaking section (#2). The directions in the original textbook stated: "Have a conversation with your partner." While this is an excellent objective for a speaking exercise, the students found this task extremely difficult. Because of the absence of more specific

directions and concrete tasks, many low level students did not understand what was being asked of them or where to begin. Conversely, many high level students, while capable of completing the task, were constrained because they felt that they had to use the word bank.

We decided to eliminate the word banks entirely, encouraging students to draw on vocabulary that they already know, or to use words that were introduced earlier in the listening section. We replaced, “Have a conversation with your partner,” with very specific instructions: “First, draw a simple picture of your room. Then talk with your partner. As you listen, try to draw your partner’s room.”

Although the directions and the task are considerably different, the objective remains the same. If students complete the concrete tasks that we have set for them, they will still have a conversation about their rooms.

The second speaking section is about high school, and again, there are the same initial instructions: “Have a conversation with your partner,” and the students were having the same difficulties. To make the task more concrete, we created a table with a clear section for questions and answers. To preserve the objective of conversing freely in English, and allowing students to be creative in their questions and responses we created a blank space in the table for follow-up questions to be determined by the students. This was our way of finding a balance between having concrete tasks and simultaneously encouraging open and creative conversation.

The revisions of these specific activities are examples of what we tried to do with the textbook revision in terms of creating more specific tasks while preserving the original

intent of the authors. Although we made substantial changes to the specific methods, we did not lose sight of the larger objectives.

### Advice

Although our situation was unique, and may not be relevant in a wide sense, there are three pieces of advice that we can offer after having been through this revision process. The first is especially relevant for revisions of textbooks, but the latter two can also apply to revisions in general: Keep it simple, don’t be afraid, and stay true.

### *Keep it simple*

In many cases, our revision took the form of a simplification. We felt that teachers could supplement and add additional activities for students who were working through the textbook materials quickly. For example, if students could easily complete the specific tasks, then they would probably be ready to have a free and unstructured conversation in English. Teachers could give directions verbally, and simply say to the students, “Have a conversation with your partner.” On the other hand, if the initial task is “Have a conversation with your partner,” and it is too difficult for the students, then teachers are faced with the challenge of trying to simplify the materials. Furthermore, students may be discouraged at their own inability to complete the task. Especially for material that will be used for a large number of students with widely varying ability levels, keep it simple, and allow teachers to make it more difficult as needed.

### *Don't be afraid*

A revision should involve substantial changes. Don't be afraid to make changes that will create a better result. This piece of advice is best illustrated with an example from our experience. In our first attempt to revise the textbook, we mistakenly thought that the audio CD that had been created to accompany the textbook was somehow sacred and inviolable. We were afraid to tamper with this resource, and as a result, all of our revisions were held in check by our belief that we had to use all of the audio instructions and scripts in the form that they were passed on to us. In later revisions, as we became more comfortable with the process, we realized that there was nothing keeping us from creating a new audio resource as well.

### *Stay true*

While making these changes, it is also very important to stay true to the original objectives, not the specific methods or techniques. If the objective is to encourage students to communicate with one another, whatever new method effectively achieves this objective is appropriate, even if it appears radically different from the original method. We were initially concerned about offending the previous authors as we revised, but realized that as long as we were staying true to their objectives, there should be no cause for offense no matter how drastic the changes.

### *Conclusion*

With many universities hiring contract lecturers for fixed terms, the revision process will likely be a familiar and

continuous one for many people as textbooks, lesson plans, exams, and curriculums are passed from one set of teachers to the next. We focused on the revision of a textbook, but hopefully our experience and advice can be applied to any revision process involving a work in progress passed down from one set of authors to the next. It is not an easy task to revise someone else's work, but the challenges can be overcome by not being afraid to make substantial changes if necessary and by staying true to the intent and objectives established by the original authors. Good luck with your revisions.

### References

- Carroll, M., & Head, E. (2003). Institutional pressures and learner autonomy. In A. Barfield & M. Nix (Eds.) *Learner and teacher autonomy in Japan 1: Autonomy you ask!* Tokyo: JALT.
- Toyama, J., Carroll, M., Douglas, L., Harrison, M., Head, E., Miyake, T., et al. (2005) *English Here and Now at Momoyama*. Osaka, Japan: Momoyama University.
- Toyama, J., Carroll, M., Romney, C., Decker, W., Miyake, T., Douglas, L., et al. (2006) *English Here and Now at Momoyama*. Osaka, Japan: Momoyama University.

Appendix one

The original unit, before revision, is on the left. The revised unit is on the right.

JALT2006 — Community, Identity, Motivation

IB

ENGLISH HERE & NOW at Momeyama Unit 2 Could you tell me the way to the Language Centre?

### 1. Dialogue

Listen to Yoshi giving Ayumi directions to a restaurant.

Ayumi: Do you know any good places to eat around here?  
 Yoshi: Yes. There's a great restaurant just around the corner. It's called Finon. It serves all kinds of food - Vietnamese, Italian, Korean ...  
 Ayumi: Where is it exactly?  
 Yoshi: Well, you go out of the university gate - the main gate, not the one that leads to the station, and you turn left. Go past the pub. That's the one with the red sign!  
 Ayumi: That's the one with the red sign?  
 Yoshi: No, the other one, to the left, with the black and white sign. Cross the road, and just before you get to Lawson's turn right. Go up the hill, and it's on your left, less than a minute's walk.  
 Ayumi: It sounds easy enough. But could you draw me a map just to make sure?  
 Yoshi: All right. (draws a map) Here you are.  
 Ayumi: Thanks Yoshi.

Find the restaurant on Yoshi's map:

### 2. Speaking: What about you?

Describe to your partner how to get to a place you know well, for example, a restaurant, your old school, your favorite cinema or sportsground ...

Don't forget to say where you are starting from.  
 ("You go out of the University gate...", or "Come out of the station and turn left...")

As you listen to your partner, draw a map according to what you hear. Ask questions to check your understanding.

**Phrase bank : directions**

1. Do you know any ... ?
2. Where is it exactly?
3. Could you tell me the way to ... ?
4. ... just round the corner
5. You go out of the gate
6. Turn left/right
7. You'll see ....
8. ... on the other side of the road
9. Keep going
10. You pass ...
11. Cross the road
12. It's next door to ...

IB

IB

ENGLISH HERE & NOW at Momeyama Unit 2 Could you tell me the way to the Language Centre?

### 1. Matching

Match the phrases with the pictures.

Turn right  
 Go straight  
 On the corner  
 Across from  
 Through the intersection  
 At the end of  
 Next to  
 Turn left

### 2. Listening

Listen to the Sarah explaining about Shinsaibashi. Draw a line on the map and circle where she went. Start at Shinsaibashi station.

### 3. Speaking

Tell your partner how to get to places in Shinsaibashi. Use the map above. Think of your own ideas.

IB

Appendix two: Unit 6

The original unit, before revision, is on the left. The revised unit is on the right.


JALT2006 — Community, Identity, Motivation

**IB**

ENGLISH HERE & NOW at Missouri Unit 6 What was your high school like?

**1. Listening** 6


Listen to Emily describing her room. Draw a plan of the room (with the window, bed, cupboard, desk, bookshelf, suitcase, refrigerator, cooker and sink).



**2. Speaking**

Have a conversation with a partner. Describe your rooms to each other and practice using some of the words from the word banks. (Look back at page 8 for more prepositions.)

A: What's your room like?  
B: \_\_\_\_\_  
A: \_\_\_\_\_?  
B: \_\_\_\_\_



<b>Word bank: Furniture</b> microphone bookshelf refrigerator bed suitcase sink microwave desk	<b>Word bank: Positions</b> in front of behind next to under on top of on the corner to the left/right on the left/right	<b>Question bank</b> Do you sleep? Where do you eat? Do you have a ... ? Is that next to/behind/ in front of ... ? What furniture do you have?	<b>Word bank: Location</b> It's on the left, so you go to next to the desk is a bookshelf. It's between the bed and the desk. The bed is under the window. There's a refrigerator next to the sink.
--	--	---	--

**3. What were YOUR classes like at high school?**

Have a conversation with your partner. Look back at the dialogue on page 21 and use it as a model.

Tell your partner about your high school classes. (Look back at page 18 for more questions.)

A: What was your favorite/least class?  
B: \_\_\_\_\_  
A: What was it like?  
B: \_\_\_\_\_

The teacher was great/terrible/  
funny/interesting.  
He/she used to talk a lot/ask a lot/  
encourage us.  
Students used to sleep/learn  
carefully/late.


23

**IB**

ENGLISH HERE & NOW at Missouri Unit 6 What was your high school like?

**1. Listening** 6

Listen to Eric describing his room. Match the numbers with the correct words.

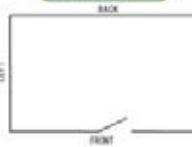


1. ( ) 2. ( ) 3. ( ) 4. ( ) 5. ( ) 6. ( ) 7. ( ) 8. ( ) 9. ( )	a. MP player b. bed c. bookshelf d. chair e. cooker f. desk g. dresser h. lamp i. microwave j. refrigerator k. stereo l. sink m. table n. TV
--	---

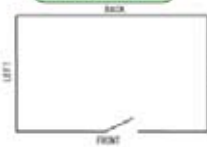
**2. Speaking**

First, draw a simple picture of your room. Then talk with a partner. As you listen, try to draw your partner's room.

**My room**



**Partner's room**



Now ask your partner these questions about high school. Write your partner's answers. Use the spaces marked with a Q for your own follow-up questions.

Questions	Answers
1. What was your favorite class in high school?	
2. Q	
3. What was your least favorite class?	
4. Q	
5. Did you have to wear a uniform?	
6. Q	

23