

Communicative competence and senior high school oral communication textbooks in Japan

Keywords

communicative competence, high school English, textbook evaluation

This article evaluates how senior high school Oral Communication (OC) textbooks in Japan support the development of students' spoken communicative competence. Using the continuum set out by Littlewood (2004), ten OC textbooks are examined and are found to contain mostly non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice. This article claims that the use of such textbooks cannot adequately develop students' communicative competence, and calls for EFL instructors who teach OC classes to actively evaluate the textbooks they use.

本論では、日本の高等学校のオーラルコミュニケーションの教科書が、どのくらい生徒の会話能力を開発させられるのかを検証する。Littlewood (2004)の方法を使って評価し、10冊の教科書のほとんどが非コミュニケーション型や前コミュニケーション型であることが明らかになった。本論では、そのような教科書では適切に生徒の会話能力を開発することは出来ないと結論づけ、使用教科書を担当教師が積極的に評価することを求めている。

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TEXTBOOKS EXERT considerable influence on the learning that takes place within a classroom. They can be utilized in a variety of ways: as a framework for the syllabus, to provide grammar explanations and practise, or as a resource for activities. In public schools in Japan, teachers are required to use textbooks in class, and those textbooks must be authorized by the government. Therefore those textbooks should put into practice the government's educational goals, which include the development of communicative competence. This article will explore to what extent senior high school Oral Communication (OC) textbooks in Japan achieve this goal by evaluating the communicativeness of the activities in the textbooks. While the expression senior high school is used in much of the TESOL material in Japan, the term upper secondary school is used in governmental material. In this article, both are taken to mean the same thing and are used interchangeably.

Context

Communicative competence has been a buzzword in English language teaching in Japan for several years. In 2003, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) published an action plan to cultivate "Japanese with English abilities," in particular "practical communication abilities," (MEXT, 2003a, para. 6) or communicative competence. In the same year, they published a course of study (MEXT 2003b) for both junior and senior high schools providing overall objectives for English language education, as well as describing in detail

language activities, treatment of language activities, and language elements that should be included in classes to put the action plan into practice.

In Japanese senior high schools, English education is divided into six sub-subjects: English I, English II, Oral Communication I (OC I), Oral Communication II (OC II), Reading, and Writing. All students are required to take English I and OC I, (MEXT, 2002), usually in their first year. English I typically utilises the grammar-translation method, and focuses on the formal structure of the language. OC I acts as a complement to English I, providing an opportunity for students to put into practice what they have learnt and to develop their communicative competence. In reference to OC I, MEXT (2003b) states, "communicative activities should be conducted in concrete language-use situations so that students play the role of receivers and senders of information, ideas, etc." (Aural/Oral Communication section, para. 2). We would expect such activities to be characterised by an emphasis on meaning rather than form, and for students to communicate information authentically rather than displaying language they have just been taught.

There are several references to communicative competence in the MEXT course of study, which are outlined below, using Canale and Swain's (cited in Brown, 2007) seminal definition of communicative competence as including four components: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. With regard to OC I classes, the course of study describes classroom instruction "to understand and utilise basic sentence patterns and grammatical items that are required for communicative activities," and "to pronounce English with due attention to the basic characteristics of English sounds such as rhythm and intonation," (2003b, Aural/Oral Communication section, para. 3) which refers to grammatical competence. Discourse competence was referred to as activities "to organise and present information obtained by listening or reading, one's own ideas, etc. and to understand what is presented," and sociolinguistic competence as "to transmit information, ideas, etc., appropriately in accordance with the situation and the purpose" (2003b, Aural/Oral Communication section, para. 2). Finally, strategic competence could be found in details of instruction "to utilise expressions that are required in asking for repetition and paraphrasing" (2003b, Aural/Oral Communication section, para. 3).

While there has been debate over whether textbooks are needed or not in EFL classrooms

(Allright, 1981; Block, 1991), many EFL practitioners use a textbook. As Japan requires all schools to use government-approved textbooks, whether or not the textbooks include communicative language activities will have a strong influence on student development of communicative competence. In order to ascertain to what extent OC textbooks actually do include communicative activities, and are therefore beneficial to communicative competence, this paper presents an evaluation of OC textbooks.

Method

Ten authorized senior high school OC I textbooks were examined. The books were obtained as samples from various publishing companies. According to the textbook catalogue (教科書目録) on the MEXT website, in the year 2006 there were 21 authorised OC I textbooks, thus the ten textbooks analysed here represent about half the textbooks available for use in OC I.

Using the criteria outlined below, the speaking activities in the main body of the textbook were categorised into five types. As this evaluation is concerned with OC lessons, it limits itself to the spoken element of communicative competence. The evaluation excludes the various additional sections in textbooks for two reasons. Firstly, the material in the main body of the textbook likely represents what the authors want to focus on most strongly. Secondly, in my experience these extra sections are often not covered in class because of time constraints.

Criteria for evaluation

The criteria by which the speaking exercises were categorised were based on a continuum set out by Littlewood (2004), which divides language learning activities into five types: "non-communicative learning," "pre-communicative language practice," "communicative language practice," "structured communication," and "authentic communication" (p. 322). This continuum provides a clear guide to how communicatively different learning activities are, reaching beyond the limits of a particular method. Table 1 gives short descriptions and concrete examples of each type of activity.

Results

The results section is divided into two parts. The first presents a comparative analysis of the communicativeness of each of the textbooks analysed according to the categories presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Continuum of textbook activity communicativeness

Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative learning	Communicative language practice	Structured communication	Authentic communication
Focuses on the structure of language (form, meaning) and includes substitution and awareness-raising exercises	Practises language with some attention to meaning but doesn't exchange new messages and includes question-and-answer practice	Practises pre-taught language in a context where new information is exchanged and includes information-gap activities and personalised questions	Uses language in situations to elicit pre-taught language with some unpredictability and includes structured role plays and simple problem solving	Uses language in situations where the meanings are unpredictable and includes creative role-plays and complex problem solving

(Littlewood, 2004)

The second part examines representative examples of each type of exercise.

Quantitative results

Table 2 presents the quantitative results of the analysis conducted on the textbooks used for this study.

Overall, non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice combined make up over 70% of the content. About a quarter of the exercises represent communicative language practice. Less than 5% allow students to experience structured communication. A tiny percent (less than 1%) involve authentic communication.

Examinations of representative examples of each type of exercise

In this section each type of exercise will be examined and an illustrative example from a textbook will be provided.

Non-communicative learning

Approximately 30% of the exercises are non-communicative. Two textbooks, *Mainstream* and *Select*, contain no exercises of this kind. In the other textbooks, this kind of activity is in the form of chorus readings or dialogues that require the students to cut and paste from a nearby hint box. The following example, Extract 1, is from *Interact* (Yamada, et al. 2007, p. 45)

Table 2. Results of analysis of communicativeness of textbook activities

Title of textbook	Non-communicative learning	Pre-communicative language practice	Communicative language practice	Structured communication	Authentic communication	Total
<i>Planet Blue</i>	23 (39)	19 (32)	10 (17)	7 (12)	0 (0)	59
<i>True Colors</i>	25 (55)	12 (27)	8 (18)	0 (0)	0 (0)	45
<i>Mainstream</i>	0 (0)	18 (33)	37 (67)	0 (0)	0 (0)	55
<i>Birdland</i>	4 (15)	15 (58)	7 (27)	0 (0)	0 (0)	26
<i>Expressways</i>	21 (36)	25 (42)	4 (7)	8 (13)	1 (2)	59
<i>Open Door</i>	22 (49)	14 (31)	7 (16)	1 (2)	1 (2)	45
<i>Interact</i>	21 (39)	22 (41)	10 (18)	1 (2)	0 (0)	54
<i>Step</i>	20 (54)	14 (37)	1 (3)	1 (3)	1 (3)	37
<i>Hello There</i>	1 (3)	19 (56)	14 (41)	0 (0)	0 (0)	34
<i>Select</i>	0 (0)	19 (58)	12 (36)	2 (6)	0 (0)	33
Average	137 (30.6)	177 (39.6)	110 (24.6)	20 (4.5)	3 (0.7)	447(100)

Note. Numbers in brackets represent percentage

Extract 1. Non-communicative exercise example

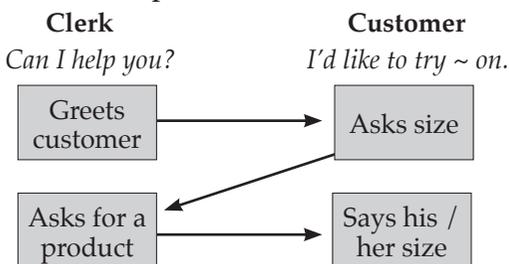
- A: Would you like to (1) with me this Saturday?
 B: Sounds good to me.
 A: Great. So I'll meet you at (2) at (3).
1. go shopping / go to a rock concert / go cycling
 2. your house / the station / the school gate
 3. 9:00 / 4:15 / 12:00

It is easy to imagine students mechanically carrying out this exercise without using their intellectual faculties. It is questionable whether this exercise even represents structure focus because students can complete the activity successfully without attention to grammatical structure.

Pre-communicative language practice

Pre-communicative language practice accounts for almost 40% of textbook exercises. These include practice dialogues that require students to pay some attention to form or meaning, but produce display language.

Extract 2 is from *Planet Blue* (Negishi, Yoshitomi, Kanou, Shizuka, & Takayama, 2006, p. 31). In the original, the directions in the boxes were in Japanese, and the suggested phrases were in English.

Extract 2. Pre-communicative language practice exercise example

While in some ways this activity could be said to be inauthentic, in that students are displaying language, some degree of artificiality is inevitable in a language learning classroom. As Widdowson states, language learning materials are “specially contrived for learning” (cited in Gilmore, 2004, p. 363). Furthermore, “students are in class, they know they are in class, and they expect to do some artificial practice” (Jan Madakb, cited in Lindsay & Knight, 2006, p. 138). This kind of practice is necessary to improve communicative competence. However, in the textbooks examined, this kind of activity is predominant. The word practice suggests a means to an end,

rather than the end itself. In the PPP learning cycle, there is a production stage after the practice. However, this is not the case with some of the textbooks examined; *True Colors* (Takemura, H., et al., 2002), for example, contains 72% non-communicative learning and pre-communicative language practice, and only 18% communicative language practice, despite claiming it is “a must-have textbook for communication” or “コミュニケーションのための必修書” (*True Colors* publicity leaflet).

Communicative language practice

Around a quarter of the exercises analyzed could be identified as communicative language practice. These activities usually contained some kind of information gap to allow the students to be receivers and senders of information, as the MEXT action plan requires. In such activities, students have a need to respond meaningfully. The first kind is an opinion gap where students exchange personal information about their own ideas or preferences. In fact, almost all textbooks used this type of gap at least once, usually at the beginning of the textbook where students exchange personal information. Extract 3 is from *Mainstream* (Saito, et al., 2005, p. 15).

Extract 3. Communicative language practice exercise example of introductory material

- A: What are your hobbies?
 B: I like ____.
 A: What do you do in your free time?
 B: I usually ____.

Mainstream has a very high proportion (67%) of these kinds of exercises. Each chapter has a short Profile section, which requires students to ask one another personal questions, as well as a Class Poll section, which requires students to poll members of the class. Unfortunately, the Profile is positioned in the coloured top of the page, almost like a header, and the Class Poll is somewhat incongruously attached to the end of the chapter. It is easy to imagine these sections being omitted in class, resulting in a textbook that is much less communicative than it initially appears.

In the second kind of information gap, students have different but complementary information and exchange that information to complete the activity. *Select* was notable for its frequent use of devices such as complementary maps or tables to create such gaps. Extract 4 is from *Select* (Kitade, Nagao, & Ryan, 2007, p. 37-38). In the original, the labels for the table were in Japanese, and the information

within the table was in pictorial form, denoted by brackets below. Table A and Table B were presented on separate pages that did not face each other.

Extract 4. Communicative language practice exercise example

Table A

	Weather		Climate
	Today	Tomorrow	
Tokyo	<sunny>	<cloudy>	
Singapore		<rainy>	<hot>

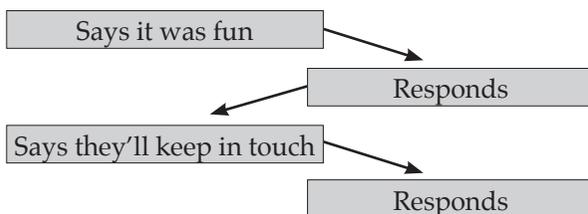
Table B

	Weather		Climate
	Today	Tomorrow	
Tokyo			<humid>
Singapore	<sunny>		

Structured communication

Structured communication and authentic communication both tended to be role-plays, with the former being more structured and the latter more creative. Exercises involving structured communication accounted for around 5% of the textbook content. Extract 5 is from *Planet Blue* (Negishi, et al, 2006, p. 81). In the original, the directions were in Japanese.

Extract 5. Structured communication exercise example



Authentic communication

Authentic communication was very rarely found; less than 1% of the activities could be designated as such. Extract 6 from *Expressways* (Kobayashi, House, & Mitsui, 2006, p. 67) is a creative and challenging activity.

Extract 6. Authentic communication exercise example

In groups, make a skit out of another popular Japanese folk tale, your favourite movie or TV show, or your original story. Act it out.

Discussion

Despite MEXT's emphasis on communicative competence and despite the claims of some of the OC textbook publishers, it is difficult to see how such material can do more than play lip-service to improving communicative competence. The non-communicative learning exercises, when they focus on the structure of language, are useful for improving grammatical or discourse competence. Unfortunately, the many cut-and-paste style dialogue practices only allow students to practise their pronunciation. Pre-communicative language practice and communicative language practice are useful stepping-stones to more authentic communication, but the textbooks examined in this article appear to stop there. *Mainstream*, the textbook with the most communicative language practice, marginalises its communicative activities through its formatting. Structured communication and authentic communication which would give students opportunities to practise sociolinguistic and strategic competence are rarely featured.

Sakui carried out a survey of Japanese teachers and found that communicative activities and "serious test-taking preparation" (2004, p. 161) are seen as mutually exclusive by students and teachers, and teachers are being forced to wear "two pairs of shoes" (p. 158), in that while required to utilise communicative activities they also have to prepare students for non-communicative entrance exams. The OC textbooks further reflect this "dichotomous curriculum realization consisting of two distinct methodologies," (p. 158) in that while MEXT emphasises communicative competence in OC classes, the textbooks used do not contain communicative activities. Therefore student communicative competence is not being developed.

Limitations

This research has certain limitations that should be taken into consideration. Firstly, the divisions between the different kinds of exercise can be illusive; Littlewood (2004) describes the divisions as representing a continuum, where distinctions are arbitrary. Additionally, any activity can be made more or less communicative depending on the ingenuity of the teacher. Finally, there was difficulty recording the number of exercises. Several exercises were made up of more than one part or stage, raising the issue of whether they were one exercise or each stage represented a separate exercise.

Furthermore, the evaluation was carried out by a single researcher, whereas triangulating the data by involving several researchers would improve

data reliability. Due to these limitations, this research is intended as a tentative starting-point, illustrating the communicativeness of OC textbooks and perhaps opening up areas for further research.

Finally, all the books evaluated were OC I textbooks. There are a small number of follow-up OC II textbooks. According to the textbook catalogue on the MEXT website, in the year 2006 there were 21 authorised OC I books and 6 OC II books. These OC II books may contain more structured or authentic communication exercises. However, as the second and third year classes of senior high school are dedicated to preparing for university entrance exams, in my experience OC classes are frequently only required in the first year. Thus OC I textbooks are often the only OC textbooks student consistently encounter in high school.

Conclusion

The textbooks in this article, despite being OC I textbooks, do not appear to adequately provide opportunities for students to develop their oral communicative competence. This raises the issue of how best to assist our students in developing communicative competence. If the textbooks are unsatisfactory, then teachers must use their creativity to design supplementary activities that allow students to communicate more authentically. Creating new activities may be seen as an extra burden for teachers, and while I do not go as far as Block (1991) in saying that we should avoid textbooks altogether, I agree that "If we are to be reflective practitioners in the field of ELT, we need to consider all aspects of our teaching. I believe that preparing our own materials is one of these aspects" (p. 216).

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