Typefaces in ELT Textbooks: What Typeface Style is Most Common?

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This paper is a report on an examination of 298 commercially published ELT coursebooks commonly used in Japan to determine if one typeface, or style of typeface, is more common than another. Although no single typeface or typeface style could be identified as the most common overall, the results did show that for the narrow category of model answers, the most common typeface style was handwriting. Furthermore, it was found that most coursebooks used multiple typefaces, but usually no more than 2 or 3, and that coursebooks that used only a single style were more likely to use a serif typeface. Finally, results showed that most coursebooks followed traditional typographic conventions by using a serif typeface for content and a sans serif typeface for titles, headings, etc.

当論文では、商業的に出版されているELT教科書のうち、日本で一般的に使用されている298冊を調査し、他のフォントと比べて一般的と呼べるフォントあるいはフォントのスタイルが実際に存在するかどうか調べた結果について報告する。結果として、特に一般的であると認められる特定のフォントまたはフォントのスタイルは存在しなかったものの、解答例の部分に限って言うと、手書きスタイルが最も一般的であると判明した。更に、大抵の教科書は複数の種類のフォントを使用するものの、一般的に1冊の中で2〜3種類以上は使用されていなかった。また、1種類のフォントしか使用していない教科書は大抵の場合serifを使用していた。最後に、調査の結果、大抵の教科書は慣習的なフォントの使用法に従い、本文にはserif、タイトルや表題等にはsans serifを使用していることも判明した。

Does typography matter for ELT materials? Is one typeface or font better than another? Romney (2005) related an instance of a classroom activity that failed due to the students' inability to accurately read the textbook. The students read a lowercase 'l' as an uppercase 'I' and therefore were unable to complete the task. This letter confusion was a problem of legibility, which is commonly referred to as the ability to distinguish between individual letter shapes (Felici, 2012), and the typeface used for the teaching materials discussed by Romney, *Arial*, utilizes a simple vertical line for both. In this case, typography did matter.

Typography Fundamentals for Language Learning Materials

Typography is the way in which language is represented on the page and influences the reader's perception of the text. Typography is to written language as pronunciation and intonation are to spoken language. Few language teachers would disagree that poor pronunciation can cause communication difficulties. Similarly, poor typography can cause reading difficulties.

The most basic element of typography is the typeface, often used interchangeably by non-typographers with *font*. Felici (2003) put it best when he said, "the font is the cookie cutter, and typeface is the cookie" (p. 20). That is, a font is a computer program that creates letter shapes; a typeface is a collection of letters, punctuation, and so on. There are of course other typography considerations including the size of the typeface (point), character spacing (kerning), and line spacing (leading) to name a few. But the fundamental consideration for any creator of language-teaching materials is typeface, and unfortunately it is one that many language teacher–writers ignore; they simply use the default typeface for their word processor (Romney, 2014). Perhaps this stems from a widespread belief amongst language teachers that font choice is a matter of aesthetics and personal preferences (Romney, 2006). Although it is true that typography is heavily influenced by art, it does have rules, conventions, and best practices designed to improve the reader experience (Felici, 2012). Furthermore, it has been the subject of scientific inquiries for decades (Wang, 2012). Unfortunately, many of these inquires are based on assumptions and are often unsound (Beier, 2012). For example, a long-held commonsense truism amongst typographers has been that a serif typeface, that is a

typeface with extra flares at the end of the main character strokes, has better legibility, but research has been inconclusive and as Beier (2012) noted, serif typefaces are not "by default" (p. 127) more legible.

Nevertheless, typography is more than just aesthetics and poor typography can cause confusion. Materials writers, especially those publishing their own materials for use in their own classrooms (e.g., handouts), should actively choose a typeface. This presents materials writers with the question: Which typeface should be used for language-learning materials?

Familiarity

One of the key concepts of typography is that the typeface that is easiest to read is the typeface that is most familiar to the reader (Hoener, Salend, & Kay, 1997; Craig & Bevington, 1999; Felici, 2012; Soleimani & Mohammadi, 2012). Although there has been some debate as to what is meant by familiarity, some say it is the commonality of letterforms; others say that it is the frequency of exposure to a specific typeface (Beier & Larson, 2013). Of course neither of these suppositions are mutually exclusive—commonality cannot exist without exposure—so perhaps the best definition of familiarity is to include both ideas, so that the typeface that is most familiar is one that has common letter shapes and is often used. However, the general consensus, at least amongst typographers, is that familiarity is a product of repeated exposures to the typeface, with some even going so far as to say, "Readers eventually will become used to whatever typeface they are presented with" (Beier, 2009, p. 15). The typeface designer Zuzana Licko (as cited in Beier, 2012) put it succinctly: "Readers read best what they read most" (p. 174).

So for language teacher-writers, perhaps the question becomes: What typeface is most familiar to my students? That is to say, which typeface have they most been exposed to? Romney (2017) proposed that, at least for making supplemental handouts to accompany a commercially published textbook, the most familiar typeface is the one used in the textbook. The idea is that the majority of the course time would most likely be spent with the coursebook, and the typeface used for the textbook would therefore become familiar. This idea can be further expanded beyond an individual class to language learning generally, as it is likely that the most exposure to printed English for English language learners (ELLs), especially those whose native language does not principally use the Latin alphabet, is in the form of a textbook. Of course, Japanese ELLs are exposed to English typefaces in other forms as well, for example, typefaces used in Japanese language publications, mostly as Romanized Japanese or short English phrases used in advertising.

However, unless the students are widely reading English on their own, these short bursts of exposure to English hardly compare to the time spent, both in class and out, with a textbook.

If this notion that students receive most of their exposure to printed English from textbooks is accepted as true, or at least highly likely, then the question becomes: Which typeface is most commonly used in ELT textbooks?

Exact Typeface vs. Style of Typeface

Trying to determine a single, most common typeface by means of using a textbook analysis would be nearly impossible for several reasons. First, the number of typefaces is just too large. Fonts.com, a leading online portal for purchasing typefaces, sells more than 150,000 fonts (Fonts.com, n.d.). Second, the process of exactly identifying a specific typeface is a tedious and inaccurate one. The most common way is to compare individual letter shapes to a database of existing typefaces. The website Indetifont.com has a tool for doing this. Users are asked more than a dozen questions about the appearance of individual letter shapes, for example, "What style is the upper-case 'Q' tail?" or "Is the '4' open or closed?" (Indentifont.com, n.d.). Based on the user's responses, the website proposes one or more possible fonts. These are only possible matches, meaning that one of them could be the typeface in question or none of them might be the typeface. An exact match can rarely be made.

However, instead of trying to identify an exact typeface, it is quite possible to identify the style or category of typeface used in ELT textbooks as this is relatively straightforward and simple. As noted above, familiarity is not only a reader exposure to a specific typeface, but also how similar the letter shapes are to other typefaces.

Unfortunately, as typography is both art and science, just about everything is open to interpretation and style classification is no different. For example, Bringhurst (2004) discussed five styles of Latin typefaces. Felici (2003) grouped typefaces by three different categories, each with numerous and overlapping subcategories, and Williams (2014) offered six styles of type.

The most basic categorization, and the one that most typographers can agree on, is a binary system of serif and sans serif. A serif typeface is one that has serifs, that is to say small extensions from the main letter shape. Sans serif typefaces, as the name suggests, do not have serifs.

This binary system is not without its limits, however, as it is mainly used to separate so-called "text typefaces" (Sanocki & Dyson, 2012, p. 3) used for sentence on sentence,

paragraph on paragraph publications. This system does not account for typefaces imitating handwriting and calligraphy. Nor is it useful for classifying other kinds of typefaces such as blackletter and display typefaces (Felici, 2003, p. 74) intended for advertising displays such as posters. Figure 1 shows examples of common typeface styles.

Serif:	Times New Roman
Sans Serif:	Helvetica
Handwriting:	*Lucida Handwriting*
Calligraphy:	*Edwardian Script ITC*
Monospaced:	Lucida Console
Blackletter:	Lucida Blackletter
Display:	Curly MT

Figure 1. Typeface styles listed on the left with names of common examples using the named typeface.

Method

In order to determine if one style of typeface, or if possible, a single typeface, is more commonly used in ELT textbooks, an examination of commercially published coursebooks in Japan was undertaken.

The study reviewed 298 coursebooks (N = 298) published between 1992 and 2016, the most current year available at the time. It was conducted on and off for 10 years from 2007 to early 2017 using convenience sampling whenever time and access to coursebooks was available. The study included both textbooks published by domestic Japanese publishers (n = 177) and international publishers (n = 121). It included all levels of coursebooks from beginner to advanced, both multiskill and single-skill textbooks, and covered both general English as well as English for specific purposes (ESP) books.

The examination of an individual textbook began by reviewing the copyright and acknowledgments pages of the book to see if one or more typefaces were listed as being used in the book. This was the only way to definitively identify a typeface and therefore was an attempt to determine if one specific typeface was most commonly used for ELT coursebooks. After any listed typefaces were recorded, a middle unit in the textbook was investigated by looking at the text printed on the page(s) and answering a series of questions.

The first question was: Does the textbook use more than one typeface? This question was answered by comparing multiple instances of the letter shapes of commonly used letters such as a lowercase 'a' or an uppercase 'T' in various sections, such as titles, headings, and paragraphs. If it was determined that only one typeface was visibly present, the textbook was recorded as a single-typeface example. The style of typeface was also noted (e.g., serif, sans serif, etc.). If more than one style of typeface was observed, a series of additional features were recorded, namely how many different styles of typefaces were apparent and which style was used for which element of the textbook. For example, there might be two styles of typefaces on the page: a sans serif typeface for headings and a serif typeface for paragraph text.

Both the structural elements and the pedagogical elements of the textbook were considered. The structural elements reviewed were titles, headings, subheadings, content, and headers and footers. The pedagogical elements reviewed were grammar, vocabulary, instructions, and model answers. The typeface style for activities for the four language skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—was separately recorded.

For the purposes of this study, typefaces were classified in one of the following five categories: serif, sans serif, handwriting (typefaces mimicking handwritten text), monospaced (typefaces with fixed character spacing like a typewriter), and display typefaces (nonstandard typefaces used for displays). These categories were created on an ad hoc basis. The study began with just two categories, serif and sans serif, and added additional typeface styles as they were encountered. No instances of calligraphy or blackletter typefaces were encountered, so they were not included in the classification.

Results
Specific Typefaces

Twelve coursebooks, just over 4% of the total reviewed, listed one or more typefaces on the copyright or acknowledgments page. Three textbooks listed two typefaces each, and the remaining nine listed one each.

Through this initial analysis, twelve unique typefaces were identified. The most common were the serif typeface *Minion* with three instances and the sans serif typeface *Frutiger* with two instances. The remaining nine serif typefaces—*Aster, New Aster, Century Schoolbook, Garamond, Hollander, Palatino, Sabon, Times New Roman, Utopia*, and the single sans serif typeface *Franklin Gothic Book*—had one instance each.

Single vs. Multiple Typefaces

The study revealed 30 textbooks, just over 10% of the total, used a single typeface style. Of these 30 coursebooks, 21 books used a single serif style typeface and nine books used a single sans serif style typeface. No textbooks were identified as having used only a handwriting, monospaced, or display typeface.

Multiple Typefaces

The vast majority of coursebooks studied made use of two or more typefaces. 268 textbooks, roughly 90% of the total, had multiple typefaces. The most common occurrence, 142 examples, used two typefaces. Six textbooks, roughly 2% of the total, used six visually unique typefaces and represented coursebooks with the highest number of typefaces. The complete results are listed in Table 1.

Table 1. Number of Coursebooks Using Two or More Typefaces

Number of typeface styles	Occurrences	Percent of category	Percent of total
Two	142	53%	48%
Three	87	32%	29%
Four	30	11%	10%
Five	3	1%	1%
Six	6	2%	2%
Total	268	100%	90%

Multiple Typefaces by Structural Element

The study also collected data on how specific styles of typefaces were used in different structural elements of the book, specifically, which style of typeface was used for titles, headings, subheadings, content, and headers and footers. Titles included unit and/or chapter titles. Headings and subheadings were titles for individual learning tasks and activities. Headings were often the name of the task or activities, and subheadings were the instructions for the task or activity. The content was the actual language under study; for example, the paragraphs of text for a reading activity or a scripted conversation for a speaking activity. Headers and footers included running headers of unit titles, page numbers, and so on. Table 2 breaks down the use of typeface styles by structural element.

Table 2. Number of Occurrences of Typeface Style by Document Section

	Titles	Headings	Subheadings	Content	Headers/footers
Serif	70	39	74	217	59
Sans serif	183	215	132	42	170
Handwriting	2	1	0	0	1
Monospaced	0	1	0	1	0
Display	11	6	0	0	6
Multiple	0	0	0	8	0

It should be noted that the instances of various typeface styles by structural element do not total 268, as some coursebooks did not have all of the various sections. For example, some coursebooks did not have titles; some did not have subheadings, and so forth. The only section common to all coursebooks was the content section, which does total 268. Also, as noted in the last row of Table 2, eight coursebooks used multiple typeface styles in the content section.

Multiple Typefaces by Pedagogical Element

The study also collected data by the pedagogical elements of the coursebook. The pedagogical sections reviewed were grammar, vocabulary, instructions, and model answers as well as reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Table 3 summarizes the results.

Table 3. Number of Occurrences of Typeface Style by Pedagogical Element

	Serif	Sans serif	Handwriting	Monospaced	Display
Grammar	18	44	0	0	0
Vocabulary	110	72	0	0	0
Instructions	37	109	0	0	0
Model answers	7	19	77	2	0
Reading	162	36	0	0	0
Listening	130	36	0	0	0
Speaking	113	32	0	0	0
Writing	109	28	0	0	0

Once again, it should be noted that the instances of typeface style do not total 268 for each educational element reviewed because not all of the coursebooks contained all of the elements studied. A reading coursebook, for example, may not have had any speaking activities, and vice versa.

Discussion

The most commonly listed typeface was *Minion* and it would be tempting to claim that it is the most commonly used typeface, but with only three examples out of nearly 300, that is a claim that not only cannot be supported statistically, but also defies common sense. However, it is interesting to note that the publishers rarely listed typefaces, and when they did, it was most often a serif typeface that was listed.

In terms of which style is more common, that question also cannot be definitively answered. In textbooks that only used one typeface, a serif typeface was most common (21 instances out of 30), but 21 is not significant when 298 total coursebooks were reviewed. In terms of textbooks that used more than one typeface, there was no instance of multiple typefaces in the same style. That is to say, no textbook was discovered to use more than one serif typeface or more than one sans serif typeface and no other style. In all 268 instances of multiple typefaces used, multiple typeface styles were also used.

But what is interesting to note is that the content sections of the coursebook were more likely to use a serif typeface (f = 216). Whereas, the other structural elements of

the book—titles (f = 183), headings (f = 215), subheadings (f = 132), and headers and footers (f = 170)—were more likely to be in a sans serif typeface. This is in line with what Felici (2003) called the "traditional roles" (p. 68) for typefaces. Serif typefaces were used for "running text" (p. 68), that is to say content, and sans serif for "display roles" (p. 69) such as titles and headings. A possible conclusion that can be drawn is that typographers designing ELT coursebooks most commonly follow traditional typography conventions. This, of course, was not always the case, as there were numerous examples of the opposite. For example, there were 42 instances of a sans serif typeface used for the content sections, and 70 examples of serif typefaces used for titles. However, the data overwhelmingly show a preference for traditional typography.

Along these same lines, the data show that the preference for using only two (f = 142) or three (f = 87) typefaces was most common at nearly 53% and 32%, or a combined 85%, of the 268 coursebooks that used multiple typefaces. This also follows common typographic doctrines. Misanchuk (1992) illustrated this when he said, "There is widespread agreement that the number of fonts used should be strictly limited; the only disagreement comes as to whether the maximum number is two or three" (p. 142).

Finally, another trend that emerges from this data is that model answers were the most common use of handwriting typefaces with 77 recorded examples. This is far more numerous than the next closest style, sans serif, with only 19 occurrences for model answers. It seems that there is a basic psychological premise at play here: Namely that when students create their own language and make a notation in the coursebook, it will be in the form of handwriting. Therefore, examples of the kinds of language the students should produce are modeled in a handwriting typeface. This creates a clear contrast between other language in the book (i.e., language to be understood) and language to be produced and serves to reinforce the idea for students that *this is what you are supposed to do*. Seventy-seven occurrences of a handwriting typeface for model answers out of a total of 105 occurrences of model answers, roughly 73%, show a clear preference for using handwriting typefaces in this manner.

Limitations of the Study

The number of textbooks reviewed in this study was relatively large, but convenience sampling was used when choosing textbooks to review. The researcher simply went to the teachers' lounge at three different universities in western Japan and investigated all the textbooks available. This was an attempt to be as comprehensive as possible by including as many textbooks as could be easily and cost-effectively investigated in order to mitigate some of the issues inherent with convenience sampling such as

generalization and transferability (see Brown, 2014, for a discussion of these issues). The results might change if the participant textbooks were limited to only one particular type of coursebook, for example, general English or Business English. Additionally, the results might vary if publication dates were restricted. The coursebooks studied covered a 24-year publication range, and trends that were common two decades ago might not appear in coursebooks published in the last 5 years.

Additionally, all of the textbooks reviewed were used at the university level. What is most notably missing from the data set were textbooks used for secondary schools. The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has specific requirements for the content of the textbooks (Hardy, 2007), and the process for approval is complex and time consuming (MOFA, n.d.); therefore, the number of textbooks available for classroom use is limited. Universities are free to choose from a wide range of textbooks with varying content and, as shown, varying typography. Secondary schools have fewer choices. It is possible that within this narrower range of textbooks, different typographic trends may emerge and therefore may in fact be more familiar to Japanese learners of English. A future study of the typography of MEXT-approved secondary school textbooks is needed.

Conclusion

This study was not able to conclusively determine the most common typeface or even the most common typeface style used in ELT coursebooks available in Japan. Therefore, it seems Japanese students of English are likely to have been exposed to various typefaces, and teacher–writers, as well as professional graphic designers, are free to choose a typeface based on other criteria than familiarity. Romney (2017) proposed that typefaces with high levels of legibility, specifically so-called "schoolbook" typefaces designed for novice readers, are best.

The study did find that ELT textbooks usually followed common typography conventions of using serif typefaces for content and sans serif for titles, headings, an so on, and that typefaces were limited to a maximum of two or three. Therefore, Japanese learners of English are likely to be most familiar with these conventions and teacher–writers should take care when stepping outside of them.

Finally, the trend that did emerge from the data was that model answers most commonly use a handwriting typeface, and within this narrow context, this style of typeface is most likely to be familiar to students. Therefore, teacher–writers and professional graphic designers are encouraged to use handwriting typefaces for model answers in English language-learning materials.

Bio Data

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