

Junior High School Textbooks: An In-Depth Analysis

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Reference Data

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Textbooks are one of the primary sources of input in EFL classrooms (Northbrook & Conklin, 2018). Textbooks cannot, however, suit the needs of every teacher or student who uses them (McGrath, 2002). As such, the principled evaluation of prospective textbooks becomes an important function in EFL contexts. In this small-scale study, three Japanese junior high school textbooks are evaluated to assess the extent to which they meet the requirements set by MEXT and the teachers who use them. Littlejohn's (2011) textbook analysis framework is employed to conduct an in-depth analysis of the textbooks. The results reveal that the junior high school textbooks are surprisingly homogenous in nature, however, they are well suited to the context for which they are intended and broadly satisfy the requirements of policy makers and teachers. The ensuing discussion identifies a number of strengths and weaknesses that can broadly be applied to all three textbooks.

教科書はEFL教育現場において、インプットの最も主要なもののひとつである(Northbrook & Conklin, 2018)。しかしながら、教科書は使用者である教師や生徒のニーズをすべて満たしているわけではない (McGrath, 2002)。それ故に、使用される教科書を一定の観点で評価することは、EFL教育においてとても重要である。本論は、日本の中学校教科書が、文部科学省の設定する目標や使用者である教師のニーズにどの程度対応しているかを評価することを目的としている。Littlejohn (2011) による教科書分析の手法を用いて、異なる三社の教科書を詳細に分析した。結果として、当該の教科書は驚くほど同質でありながらも、中学校の英語教育の状況によく適合しており、また文部科学省と教師双方の要求に幅広く対応していることが明らかになった。さらに、先に分析した三つの教科書に共通する長所と短所についても論じる。

In English as a foreign language (EFL) environments such as Japan, a large proportion of the input that students receive is directly provided by instructional materials (Meunier, 2012). Textbooks in particular are considered a primary factor influencing both teachers' classroom performance (Yamanaka, 2006) and students' perceptions of the English language (Matsuda, 2002). The salient role of teaching materials together with an increasing emphasis on the development of students' communicative competence (MEXT, 2018) establishes the consequential nature of materials evaluation and selection. In this paper an analysis and evaluation of three Japanese junior high school textbooks is conducted to ascertain to what extent they (a) achieve the aims set by the Ministry for Education, Science, and Technology (MEXT), and (b) meet the practical needs of students and teachers.

Literature Review

Commercially published textbooks are perhaps the commonest form of teaching materials available to teachers (Richards, 2001). In Japanese junior high schools, MEXT approved textbooks and the supplementary materials that accompany them constitute the primary form of teaching materials (Northbrook & Conklin, 2018). Japanese English teachers often feel compelled to teach these textbooks (Yamanaka, 2006) and as a result lessons tend to be closely constructed around them (Matsuda, 2002). In junior high schools, where teachers themselves may not be fluent in English, students often consider their textbooks as important and reliable sources of input (Bardovi-Harlig, 1996). The prominent role of textbooks seemingly places them at the forefront of teaching procedures in Japanese junior high school English classrooms. Textbooks, however, cannot be designed to suit the needs of every student. McGrath (2002) noted that no textbook is perfectly suited to any individual teacher or student. This idea was echoed by Tomlinson who stated that "every textbook needs adapting every time it is used, because every group of learners is different from every other and has different needs and wants" (2012a, p. 272). Materials selection can therefore be considered a crucial process

in ensuring that the most suitable textbook is chosen to meet the needs of both students and teachers as closely as possible, without requiring excessive supplementation or adaptation.

In the context of Japanese junior high schools, teachers are often unable to select the primary textbooks that will be used in class. Local school districts select textbooks for all schools within their jurisdiction from a list of pre-approved publications. Teachers in turn, are expected to utilise the selected textbooks regardless of their own preferences, beliefs, or methodologies. In the author's experience, this can contribute to negative attitudes towards the materials, as they can be seen as an imposition rather than an aid to classroom practice. Despite the reservations that teachers may hold it may still be of value to understand the limitations and strengths of the selected textbooks, as the subsequent selection of supplementary materials such as workbooks, drill books, or digital supplementation is commonly left to teachers themselves.

MEXT stated that the guiding principle of Japanese English education is “to develop students’ basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking ... and fostering a positive attitude toward communication” (2009, p. 1). This guiding principle suggests that teachers should adopt communicative approaches to classroom instruction. However, although MEXT is increasingly encouraging the implementation of communicative teaching approaches, form-focused methodologies such as present-practice-produce (PPP) have long been the prevalent methodology in Japanese classrooms (Okamura, 2018). PPP is an approach to language teaching which is “based on a grammatical form and a cycle of activities that involves presentation of a new language item, practice of the item under controlled conditions and a production phase where the learners try out the form in a more communicative context” (Richards & Renandya, 2002, p. 93).

Harmer (2001) observed how some students enjoy the predictability and teacher centred nature of PPP. This is particularly applicable in the Japanese context, where students tend to avoid speaking freely in English (Cutrone & Beh, 2018). Teachers who may be unsure of their English proficiency, or inexperienced teachers who may yet lack confidence in their teaching abilities may also benefit from the structured nature of PPP. In Japanese classrooms, however, it has been observed that improvement of the production phase is needed as the traditionally teacher-centred nature of the Japanese classroom environment seems to favour the presentation and practice phases, with the production phase often consisting of slightly less controlled practice activities rather than creating opportunities for students to freely use the target language in a more communicative way (Hamada, 2011).

Analytical Framework

The analysis in this paper is conducted according to Littlejohn's (2011) textbook analysis framework. Littlejohn stated that although other frameworks exist which can aid in the selection of course material, the principle problem is that these frameworks “usually involve making general, impressionistic judgements on the materials, rather than examining in depth what the materials contain” and that these judgements are often based on “implicit assumptions about what ‘desirable’ materials should look like” (2011, p. 181). The goal of Littlejohn's framework is to enable an analysis that will avoid impressionistic judgements and implicit assumptions.

Littlejohn's framework consists of three stages as illustrated in Table 1. The first stage comprises an objective description of the physical aspects of the materials such as their published form, subdivision of sections, and recurring features. The second stage consists of a task analysis of a single unit of each textbook to determine what is required of students in the completion of each task. Littlejohn considered a task to constitute “any proposal contained within the materials for action to be undertaken by the learners” (2011, p. 188). The final stage constitutes a subjective inference-based analysis of the materials based on the results of the preceding two stages. The aim within this stage of analysis is to extract the apparent underlying principles of the materials (Littlejohn, 2011) such as the implied roles of learners and teachers, the implied teaching methodology, and the intended role of the materials as a whole.

Table 1
Stages of Analysis of Language Teaching Materials

1. What is there - objective description
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> statements of description physical aspects of the materials main steps in the instructional sections
2. What is required of users - subjective analysis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> subdivision into constituent tasks an analysis of tasks: What is the learner expected to do? Who with? With what content?

3. What is implied - subjective inference

- deducing aims, principles of selection and sequence
- deducing teacher and learner roles
- deducing demands on learner's process competence

Note. Adapted from Littlejohn, 2011, p. 185.

The units selected for analysis were chosen based on Littlejohn's (2011) recommendation that material to be analysed should ideally be taken from around the midpoint of a book as this material is most likely to be representative of the book as a whole. The units are chosen from three first grade textbooks. These are; (a) *One World English Course 1* (Matsumoto, 2015) lesson five, (b) *Total English 1* (Yada & Yoshida, 2015) lesson five, and (c) *Sunshine English Course 1* (Matsubata, 2015) program six. These particular textbooks were selected as they were the textbooks under consideration for implementation in the author's district in the upcoming academic year at the time of writing. Where *One World* and *Total English* both refer to their units as lessons, *Sunshine* uses the term program. For clarity, all such subdivisions are referred to as units through the remainder of the paper.

Results

The analysis revealed overt similarities in many aspects of the design and approach of the three textbooks. The homogenous nature of the textbooks are discussed in reference to four main points; (a) main teaching points, (b) teaching methodology, (c) type of syllabus, and (d) syllabus fit.

Main Teaching Points

The units selected all deal with the use of third person singular verbs. The stated outcomes of the units can be summarised as; (a) explaining other people and things, (b) asking questions about other people and things, and (c) making suggestions regarding other people and things. The main teaching points of the units concerned are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2

Main Teaching Points of One World, Total English and Sunshine

	<i>One World</i>	<i>Total English</i>	<i>Sunshine</i>
Grammar	third-person singular verb usage imperative sentences	third-person singular verb usage	third-person singular verb usage
Vocabulary	family members hobbies likes and dislikes	family members hobbies professions	family members likes and dislikes local culture
Functions	describing family describing a routine making suggestions	describing family inquiring about others	describing family describing culture describing hobbies
Pronunciation	linking words word stress <i>/s/, /ʃ/, /i:/, /e/, /ɒ/, /ou/</i>	linking words word stress <i>/f/, /u:/, /ŋ/, /dʒ/, /əʔ/</i>	linking words word stress <i>/ɜ:/</i>

Table 2 serves to illustrate the similarities between the textbooks in terms of the main teaching points around which the units are constructed. The main grammatical item of third-person verb use is presented in each of the textbooks through dialogues where one fictional character describes a family member to another. Notable exceptions are the inclusion of imperative sentences in *One World* and the seemingly lower priority placed on aspects of pronunciation in *Sunshine*.

Teaching Methodology

The stage two analyses of the units reveal the majority of tasks to be form-focused, requiring accurate language reproduction and scripted responses. The task sequence typically starts with the presentation of new language in the form of reading or listening activities. Grammar is presented deductively through guided practice tasks that gradually increase in difficulty. The task sequence typically closes with a production activity requiring students to produce language containing the specified grammatical item. The production activities, however, leave little opportunity for students to freely produce language using their own linguistic resources, as evaluation is based on the accurate

production of the specified grammar point. This task sequence and focus on the form of the language is consistent with traditional PPP methodology. The use of structural methods is not unexpected as form-focused methodologies such as PPP are common practice in Japanese classrooms (Tahira, 2012).

Type of Syllabus

The syllabi of all three textbooks can be considered to be synthetic product-based syllabi. A synthetic syllabus is one that is built up of a series of discrete language items (Nunan, 1998), while a product-based syllabus is one in which the focus is on pre-defined learning objectives (White, 1988) and the content which is to be learned (Hedge, 2000). The syllabus overviews provided at the beginning of each textbook suggest that the basis of the syllabi are grammatical items presented as discrete units of language and intended to be gradually accumulated through the course of the textbook. These grammatical items seemingly define the content of each unit. The syllabi can also be said to be cyclical in nature (Table 3). When viewed as a complete set of materials encompassing the three years of junior high school the cyclical nature of the syllabus is revealed.

Table 3
Examples of Recycled Language Across Each Textbook Series

	<i>One World</i>	<i>Total English</i>	<i>Sunshine</i>
Grammar			
present progressive tense	1-8, 2-5	1-8, 2-2	1-9, 2-2, 3-6
simple past tense	1-9, 2-1	1-9, 2-1	1-10, 2-1
pronouns	1-4, 2-4	1-4, 2-4	1-5, 1-7
Vocabulary			
relating to travel	1-9, 2-1, 3-1	1-9, 2-3, 3-1	1-10, 2-2, 3-2
relating to family	1-4, 1-5, 2-4	1-5, 2-1	1-6, 2-1
relating to school life	2-6, 3-2	1-6, 3-2	1-5, 2-6

	<i>One World</i>	<i>Total English</i>	<i>Sunshine</i>
Functions			
explaining one's culture	1-7, 3-3	2-8, 3-2	1-8, 2-11, 3-6
expressing desires/wants	2-5, 3-6	2-4, 3-7	2-6, 3-7
relating past experiences	1-9, 2-1, 3-3	1-9, 2-1	1-11, 3-1

Note. The format “1-8” refers the first-grade textbook, unit 8.

Numerous language items including grammar, vocabulary and functions are recycled through the three textbooks in each series. Vocabulary relating to travel, for example, is recycled across every grade in all three textbooks.

Syllabus Fit

The syllabus fit of each textbook can be seen as comprising the sequencing and grading of the content. All three units are preceded by units focusing primarily on the use of personal pronouns, a necessary component to the initial understanding of third-person singular verbs. The succeeding units deal with aspects of pronouns such as the use of pronouns as the object of a sentence and demonstrative pronouns. This sequencing suggests that the textbooks are graded from simple to complex grammatical items. The grading of each textbook is comparatively steep, with a new grammatical form and an average of eight new vocabulary items presented in each lesson. The exception to this is *Total English*, which presents an average of only four new vocabulary items in each lesson. There is no evidence of the grading of vocabulary, which seems to be largely determined by the grammar and functions of each unit.

Evaluation Framework

Tomlinson (2012b) emphasised that the evaluation of materials should be based on criteria that take into consideration the context of the evaluation and teachers' own beliefs. Tomlinson further differentiated between universal and local criteria, defining universal criteria as being “those that can be used to evaluate materials for any learner anywhere” and local criteria as “those specific to the context in which the materials are going to be used” (2012b, p. 148). In the case of this study, where the textbooks are specifically designed for use in public junior high schools in Japan, the universal criteria can be considered to be those set out by MEXT and can be assumed to represent the

outcomes which publishers aim to facilitate. The local criteria are based on the stage three analysis for each textbook, as well as teachers' replies to a small-scale survey conducted by the author's local educational authority. Table 4 presents a summary of the universal and local evaluation criteria.

Table 4
Criteria for the Evaluation of Teaching Materials in Context

1. Universal Criteria

Materials should:

- enable students to understand a speaker's intentions when listening to English
- enable students to talk about their own thoughts using English
- accustom and familiarise students with reading English and enable them to understand a writer's intentions when reading English
- accustom and familiarise students with writing in English and enable them to write about their own thoughts using English

2. Local Criteria

Materials should:

- contribute to student motivation by providing topics that are relatable and interesting to students
- provide opportunities for students to express their own opinions and thoughts using English
- provide opportunities for cultural learning and understanding
- not occupy too large a proportion of available class time
- aid in students' preparations for high school entrance examinations

Note. Adapted from MEXT, 2009, pg. 1.

Discussion

Table 4 indicates the need for materials to aid in student motivation. All three textbooks aim to motivate students through the use of relatable and interesting topics. However, textbooks are repeatedly shown to be one of the primary factors causing demotivation among Japanese junior high school students (Hamada, 2011; Kikuchi &

Sakai, 2009). Publishers tend to avoid any topics that might cause offence, disturbance, or embarrassment, which in-turn leads to the publication of books "in which the learners are insulted by the portrayal of an unreal EFL world where fear, danger, and sickness, satire, conflict, criticism, disagreement, and even apprehension do not exist" (Tomlinson, 2012a, p. 273). The unreal portrayal of real-world communication is evident in all three textbooks in their use of fictionalised characters, both native speakers and non-native speakers, who communicate without hesitation or error.

Similar to the inauthentic representation of real-world communication in the textbooks is the use of inauthentic language. The texts and dialogues presented in each lesson appear to be scripted in order to illustrate the pre-determined grammar points around which the textbooks are sequenced. A recent study of the authenticity of the language used in Japanese junior high school textbooks, including all three textbooks presented in this paper, concluded that "the language presented in junior high school English textbooks is not sufficiently representative of language outside the classroom" (Northbrook & Conklin, 2018, p. 325). The use of inauthentic language represents an overt weakness of the textbooks in that they fail to provide students with samples of English that they may encounter outside the classroom.

Both the universal and local criteria listed in Figure 2 indicate that textbooks should provide tasks that allow students to express their own thoughts and opinions in English. However, speaking tasks typically take the form of interview-type activities where students are expected to interact with classmates using scripted dialogues. This failure to provide opportunities for students to produce spontaneous English echoes the shortcomings of PPP methodology discussed above. Writing tasks typically take the form of translation activities or transcribing sentences used in preceding speaking activities.

The high school entrance examinations that junior high school students in Japan are expected to take are focused primarily on listening and reading competence (Yan, 2015). The washback effect from these examinations has created a system where many Japanese teachers and students consider the passing of examinations to be a more immediate priority than the improvement of their communicative ability in English (Yashima et al., 2004). In this regard, the textbooks are well suited to meet the students' needs through their focus on receptive skills, emphasis on grammatical knowledge, and accuracy-based assessment. Due to the homogeneity of the textbooks, they naturally share many of strengths and weaknesses. Table 5 lists additionally identified strengths and weaknesses shared by all three of the textbooks.

Table 5
Shared Strengths and Weaknesses of Three Japanese Junior High School Textbooks

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the production quality of the materials and supporting materials (i.e., print quality, durability, etc.) is generally high a large variety of supplementary material is available including teaching guides, reference books, workbooks, test books, and flash cards the digital textbooks which accompany each textbook are helpful in demonstrating native pronunciation and reading language is appropriately and consistently recycled 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> the textbooks cannot be used independently of the audio CD and some supplementary materials the grading of grammar items is steep receptive skills (listening and reading) seem to be emphasised more than productive skills (writing or speaking) students often cannot use the textbooks to study individually, outside of class, or independently of a teacher the use of inauthentic language intended to illustrate specific grammar items rather than language more representative of the real-world

The stage three analyses reveal that all three textbooks share the aim of providing opportunities for developing learners' linguistic competence in all four macro skills, for example, listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Reading texts are most commonly presented in the form of short dialogues between the fictional characters and appear to be graded appropriately to the students' age and proficiency level. It can be noted however that the reading texts do progress towards longer texts in the second and third grade textbooks. Listening activities are similarly well considered. Speaking tasks primarily take the form of conversations between students using scripted dialogues. These speaking tasks can be seen to provide inadequate support in terms of developing students' speaking proficiency as the scripted nature of the tasks often permit far less freedom in language production and self-expression as the MEXT recommendations (MEXT, 2018) imply they should. In terms of writing, all three textbooks fail to provide adequate practice. Writing is considered the most difficult of the four skills (Nunan, 1989) and could therefore logically be assumed to require the most practice. However, all three textbooks seem to require students to produce no more than a sentence or two of

writing in each lesson - substantially less than the practice provided for the other three language skills.

MEXT regulations state that part of the overall objective of English education at the junior high school level is to "deepen the understanding of the ways of life and culture of foreign countries and Japan" (2009, p. 8). The stage three analyses indicate that the development of students' cultural understanding is a primary aim of all three textbooks. A majority of the lessons in each textbook represent some aspect of Japanese or world culture. Common lesson topics include school life, holidays, sports, traveling, and food in foreign countries. In the author's personal experience these topics can be interest-generating topics in class. To this end, the textbooks achieve their aim of providing opportunity for cultural learning and understanding.

Overall, the materials appear well suited to the current practical realities of Japanese junior high schools. For teachers, the abundance of supporting materials has the advantage of reducing workload and presenting ideas that teachers themselves may not have considered. For learners, the use of illustrations, colourful layouts, and relatable topics may be appealing. The predictability of PPP methodology is likely to be familiar and to allow for the grammar-focused practice students require in their preparations for high school entrance examinations. McKay (2012) justified the use of such approaches in Japanese EFL textbooks by suggesting that materials should be based on the familiar ways of teaching and learning that exist within any given context. There is, however, opportunity for materials writers to prioritise the production stage further by providing more substantial output opportunities that allow students to freely use the language they have learned in a communicative context.

The homogenous nature of Japanese junior high school textbooks, however, suggests that textbook selection should not be based on the merits of the primary materials alone, but also on additional factors such as the availability of supplementary materials, publishers support, and the availability of equipment needed to use digital materials. These additional factors may become the distinguishing elements that allow administrators and practitioners to confidently decide between otherwise identical textbooks. The homogenous nature of the textbooks may be partly attributed to similar intended teaching situations, or the tendency of publishers to base current textbooks on previously successful publications (Tomlinson, 2012a). Parmenter and Tomita (2001) suggested that "the textbook authorisation system [in Japan] means that publishers have to follow [MEXT] guidelines closely in order to have their textbooks authorised for use in schools" (p.134).

Conclusion

This small-scale study is of an exploratory nature and the results are limited to the three textbooks analysed. Despite some shortcomings, it can be concluded that the junior high school textbooks evaluated in this paper are suitable for the context for which they are intended and facilitate the majority of the aims and objectives established by MEXT, as well as meet the current needs of students and teachers. The future goals of English education in Japan, however, call for the adoption of communicative methodologies, with a stronger emphasis on language production and a deemphasised use of translation activities (MEXT, 2018). To this end, publishers may need to reconsider aspects of the design and approach of the new textbooks implemented in the 2021 academic year. Another area that could be addressed in the design of the materials is the ability for students to use the textbooks independently which can be achieved in part by providing the students with listening materials, and the incorporation of supplementary materials which prove useful in the completion of some activities. An overt area needing improvement is the inauthentic representation of real-world English. A more concerted effort may be needed on the part of materials writers to present language which is representative of actual language use outside of the classroom, rather than scripting dialogues and texts intended as grammar delivery devices.

As communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches percolate through the Japanese education system both MEXT and publishers are presented with an opportunity to use their textbooks as the agents of change. McGrath stated that textbooks can facilitate curricular reform “as an instrument of change and a means of supporting teachers during such a period” (2002, p. 9). Fornaciari and Dean (2014) observed that the traditional structure of an EFL syllabus may not appeal to today’s learners, who show a preference for individualised content and digital information. This finding is supported by a recent study (Shimada, 2017) regarding the preferences and motivations of Japanese students towards web-based materials which revealed the potential for a combination of traditional textbooks and e-learning materials to contribute to student satisfaction. Publishers could attend to possibilities such as these to both further develop their own materials, and pioneer innovations in Japanese English education as a whole.

Bio Data

Roy Kemm is a graduate student at the University of Birmingham. His research interests include the use of authentic materials, teacher generated materials, and in-service teacher development.

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