

# A Textbook Analysis: With Focus on Foreign Language Activities

Yoshimi Ochiai

Ritsumeikan University

## Reference Data

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This study analyzed and evaluated the current Foreign Language Activities textbooks copyrighted by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology for grades 3 and 4. The aim of this study was to determine the extent to which the prescribed textbooks foster cross-cultural consciousness in today's globalized society. The images and words in the current textbooks were assessed to determine whether they helped pupils develop sufficient cultural understanding and to ensure that they do not provide biased knowledge in the foreign language curriculum. A content analysis, following Yuen (2011) and Davidson and Liu (2018), showed unbalanced cultural materials and disproportionate representations of non-Japanese countries and regions in the current textbooks. To equip pupils with multicultural perspectives and to raise their cultural awareness, future editions of these textbooks should include more cultural materials on diverse countries and feature a greater variety of cultural dimensions.

本稿は、小学3、4年生の外国語活動で使用される文部科学省著作教科書を分析した。本稿の目的は、グローバル社会の中で教科書がどのような異文化理解の素養を児童に育もうとしているのかを調査することにある。現行教科書に描かれている描写は、児童の異文化理解を十分に育むことができるのか、また外国語カリキュラムの中で偏った知識を伝えていないかを調査した。本調査は、Yuen(2011)とDavidson and Liu (2018)を踏襲し教科書の内容分析を行なった結果、当該教科書には文化的側面の表現描写、及び日本以外の国や地域の描写が不均衡に描かれていることが分かった。本研究の結果から、児童に多文化的な視点を身につけさせ、文化的な意識を高めるために、今後の教科書には文化の多角的な側面に着目しながら、より様々な国の文化的な表現を盛り込むことを提案したい。

More attention is being paid to the implementation of foreign language education around the world as a result of globalization. Although globalization projects an image of diversity and multiplicity, foreign language education in Japan has been

influenced by Americanization and built on the assumption that the “foreign language is English” (Kubota, 2002, p.19).

English education in Japan has been heavily influenced by Western culture, especially American culture. Historically, English textbooks in Japan have often depicted Western countries' cultures and featured Japanese or native English speakers as speakers of English. However, non-native English speakers of other nationalities and ethnicities have been underrepresented. According to Yamada (2010), the United States was the most commonly featured country in English language textbooks in Japan in the 1980s. In the 1990s' and 2000s' editions, Japan was featured the most frequently, followed by the United States, and the coverage of Europe declined. The interactions depicted in the textbooks essentially took place among the Japanese and individuals from the Inner Circle countries, where English is used as a first or dominant language (Yamada, 2010). These findings of textbook contents strongly suggest that English is primarily a tool for communication with people in Western countries.

Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched the “implementation plan for English education reform to cope with globalization” (Implementation Plan) in 2013 (MEXT, 2013). It then began to promote successive reforms in English education, which included incorporating English classes into the curricula of earlier grades in elementary school. The Implementation Plan was gradually introduced on a full scale, and the new Courses of Study in 2020 initiated in elementary school required the teaching of English as a subject in grades 5 and 6 and the teaching of Foreign Language Activities in grades 3 and 4. According to the Courses of Study (MEXT, 2017), one of the goals of Foreign Language Activities is to deepen pupils' understanding of cultures in addition to languages and to foster respect for others and a positive attitude toward communication using foreign languages.

In accordance with Article 34 of the School Education Law (1947/2019), elementary schools in Japan are required to use textbooks. There are two types of textbooks (MEXT, n.d.): those published by textbook publishers and approved by MEXT (called authorized

textbooks) and those written and copyrighted by MEXT (called copyrighted textbooks). As there are no authorized textbooks for Foreign Language Activities, MEXT distributes its copyrighted textbook, *Let's try!* to pupils in grades 3 and 4. *Let's try!* is a serial textbook with two volumes: the first volume is for the 3rd grade, and the second volume is for the 4th grade (MEXT, 2019a, 2019b).

The development of the *Let's try!* textbook series was based on the basis of another textbook series, the *Hi, friends!*, which was used as the Foreign Language Activities textbook series for grades 5 and 6 from 2012 to 2019. Some researchers, however, are critical of *Hi, friends!* from the viewpoint of cross-cultural understanding.

Kato et al. (2016) investigated the digital version of the *Hi, friends!* series and found that the cultural topics depicted there were insufficient in helping pupils understand diverse values. They discovered that it contained mostly objective and visible information about cultural topics rather than invisible and intangible materials such as metaphors and myths, which could be used to transmit values and perspectives. They also mentioned that MEXT needs to include abstract cultural topics in the textbooks in accordance with pupils' cognitive development stages. They claimed that more materials need to be included in the Foreign Language Activities textbooks not only to enhance pupils' knowledge about their own and other cultures, but also to develop their skills in interpreting other cultures and relating them to their own culture.

Furthermore, Davidson and Liu (2018) discovered that Japanese culture was predominant in the *Hi, friends!* series. Among foreign cultures, the Australian culture was the most frequently depicted. They also found that simple knowledge-based cultural materials, such as products, were portrayed more often than complex and conceptual cultural materials, such as perspectives. They likewise said that they considered the lack of cultural diversity in the *Hi, friends!* series to be problematic because foreign cultures were treated in a stereotypical manner, which did not foster cultural awareness or knowledge of diverse worldviews. Moran (2001, p.25) used the term "cultural phenomena" to refer to cultural topics consisting of several dimensions. In this current paper, the term cultural representation is used to refer to any dimensions of cultural phenomena featured in the textbook series.

### Importance of Investigating Textbooks

Teaching culture in foreign language classrooms plays an important role side by side with globalization. Teaching materials play a significant role because they shape the topics and activities in which students engage in the classroom (Cates, 2022).

According to Byram (1997), if the goal of language teaching is to develop intercultural communicative competence, it is important to teach and emphasize intercultural, cross-cultural, and transcultural issues. Kumaravadivelu (2008) argued that culture should be taught in language classrooms not only to encourage students to critically reflect on their own value systems but also to develop global cultural consciousness as a means of keeping pace with globalization. Hence, language teaching should include materials that are designed to help students learn about culture and enable them to think deeply and critically about complex phenomena. Language teachers need to choose teaching materials carefully to engage learners' minds in learning about cultural complexities (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). However, elementary school teachers in Japan cannot choose their own teaching materials for the Foreign Language Activity curriculum because MEXT prescribes a textbook series for it. Therefore, in the present study, the *Let's try!* series was analyzed to determine the extent to which it could help pupils develop their understanding of foreign cultures.

## Content Analysis of the Current Foreign Language Activities Textbooks in Japan

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which the current Foreign Language Activities textbook series used in grades 3 and 4 in Japan fosters cross-cultural consciousness. Content analysis of textbooks was used. In this study, the contents of the *Let's try!* series are analyzed and evaluated to identify the cultural phenomenon and countries included in the textbook series.

### Materials

A content analysis of printed versions of two *Let's try!* volumes, which all the 3rd and 4th grade pupils have copies of, was conducted. Digital and audio materials that supplemented the volumes were not included in the analysis because it was assumed from the findings of Kato et al. (2016) that their images were the same as those included in the printed text.

### Method

According to the National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project (1999), culture has three dimensions: products, practices, and perspectives. Moran (2001) later

added two dimensions of persons and communities to them. Previous studies have used these four dimensions (4P's) among five dimensions in their analyses of English language textbooks (Davidson & Liu, 2018; Yuen, 2011). Yuen (2011) explained the 4P's in detail. Products include tangible and intangible things created by members of a foreign culture or those perceived to have a foreign cultural appearance. Practices include customs, society, and elements of daily life, such as holidays and commonly played games. Perspectives signify inspirations, myths, superstitions, and worldviews (e.g., the concept of equality). Finally, persons include famous individuals.

The analysis conducted in the present study was based on the 4P's, but, unlike Yuen's study, the original characters in the textbooks were categorized as persons. In Yuen's analysis, fictional characters were categorized as products because the fictional characters in movies and novels can be considered products of culture. The *Let's try!* series has original fictional characters who are often drawn as if they are talking to each other or to the textbook readers. Thus, the textbooks' original and fictional characters were categorized as persons in this study.

To explore the frequency of depictions of the 4P's in the *Let's try!* series, the items appearing in the textbooks, including texts and illustrations, were counted, and their numbers were recorded on a Microsoft Excel worksheet. Instructions were excluded from the analysis. Images and texts were categorized according to three steps. The first step was the country depicted in them. An image or text was labeled "No Specific Country" if it could not be linked to any particular country based on national symbols. After the country classification, the countries were grouped by geographic region in accordance with the United Nations Statistics Division (United Nations, n.d.). In the second step, the images and texts were categorized according to the cultural dimensions on the basis of the 4P's. In the third step, the items were coded according to whether they were images or texts.

Page 4 of *Let's try!* volume one is briefly discussed here to show what the textbook series looks like and how it was analyzed in the present study. Page 4 features a listening activity, with the following instructions in Japanese at the top: "Listen to the greetings and draw a line connecting the child to his/her country's flag." There are illustrations of six children and six flags. First, these 12 items were identified as being associated with a total of six countries. Second, the flags were categorized as products and the children were classified as persons. Third, all 12 items were categorized as images.

## Findings

There were 413 items in all: 74 texts and 339 illustrations. Among the texts, 12 of them were in Japanese. *Konichiwa* (Good afternoon), *Itadakimasu* (Let's eat), *Ittekimasu* (I'm off), and *Gochisousama* (Thank you for the meal) were printed in *hiragana* and *romaji*. Five *kanjis* were listed as examples in the activity in which the pupils were supposed to describe their favorite *kanji*, and three *kanjis* were given for the meaning-guessing activity.

There were only eight foreign language texts other than English in the series: "Hello" was translated into Arabic, Bahasa Indonesia, Chinese, Hindi, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, and Swahili. The other texts were written in English. Although the curriculum and subject were titled "Foreign Language Activities," the corresponding copyrighted textbooks dealt mainly with the English language and English language learning activities. The results of the analysis showed the following: 1) the textbooks resembled picture dictionaries rather than course books; 2) the representation of country symbols in the context of the 4P's was unbalanced. Both findings are discussed in the following subsections.

## Picture Dictionary-Like Textbooks

Most English texts were in words and phrases, and there were not many English sentences throughout the textbooks. Both volumes had nine units, and only Unit 9 contained a short story written in English. Volume 1 included a story about animals playing hide-and-seek, and volume 2 included a story about a day in the life of a Japanese boy. There were many illustrations in both volumes. Most of the pages resembled those in a picture dictionary, featuring illustrations and their captions. Due to this textbook design, most of the items included in the content analysis were illustrations and images.

The Courses of Study (MEXT, 2017) stated that the purpose of introducing Foreign Language Activities in grades 3 and 4 was to motivate pupils to learn foreign languages and to familiarize them with foreign languages by focusing on listening and speaking skills. These skills would prepare pupils for a comprehensive and systematic foreign language learning process in grades 5 and grade 6. To lighten pupils' learning burdens, MEXT (2017) stated that the teaching of letters and spelling should be supplementary to the teaching of oral communication. This may be the reason that the textbooks for grades 3 and 4 included more images than written texts.

### Imbalanced Representation of Country Symbols in the Context of the 4P's

Among the four cultural dimensions depicted in the *Let's try!* series, products and practices were the most frequent. There were fewer persons and perspectives. National flags (categorized as products) and sports images (categorized as practices) were frequently seen, but most of the illustrations of practices were sports images that were not associated with a particular country. Moreover, there was only one perspectives-related item of the 4P's: an illustration of a girl with a *teru teru bōzu* (a handmade paper doll) wishing for a sunny day. Thus, the findings revealed that there is an unbalanced cultural representation in the *Let's try!* series.

Moreover, excluding the texts and illustrations categorized as No Specific Country, most of the practices were associated with Japan. Therefore, most of the foreign countries' cultural materials were categorized as products. This finding indicated that most of the cultural elements in the textbooks dealt primarily with superficial learning about the products but less with profound learning about the practices, perspectives and persons of foreign cultures.

With regard to regional comparisons, the content analysis revealed that there were more depictions of foreign cultures than of Japanese culture in the textbooks, excluding the texts and illustrations categorized as No Specific Country. Table 1 shows the numbers of Japanese, foreign, and non-country-specific cultural materials included in the two volumes. More than half (63.9%) of the items were non-country-specific cultural materials, such as food and sports. A total of 32 non-Japanese countries were featured at least once, and most of the items were images of the countries' national flags. The findings are summarized in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Number of Japanese, Foreign, and Non-Country-Specific Cultural Materials Featured in the Let's Try! Series*

	Country	No. of items	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons	Percentage of total
	<b>Africa</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1.9%</b>
1	Egypt	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%
2	Kenya	6	4	0	0	2	1.5%

	Country	No. of items	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons	Percentage of total
	<b>Asia</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>23.5%</b>
3	China	8	5	0	0	3	1.9%
4	Hong Kong	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
5	India	9	6	0	0	3	2.2%
6	Indonesia	3	2	1	0	0	0.7%
7	Japan	59	19	37	1	2	14.3%
8	Korea	8	5	0	0	3	1.9%
9	Laos	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
10	Malaysia	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
11	Philippines	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%
12	Saudi Arabia	4	3	1	0	0	1.0%
13	Turkey	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
	<b>Americas</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4.8%</b>
14	Argentina	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
15	Brazil	3	3	0	0	0	0.7%
16	Canada	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
17	Jamaica	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
18	Mexico	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
19	USA	13	6	4	0	3	3.1%
	<b>Europe</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5.1%</b>
20	Belgium	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
21	Bulgaria	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
22	Denmark	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
23	Finland	2	2	0	0	0	0.5%



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	Country	No. of items	Products	Practices	Perspectives	Persons	Percentage of total
24	France	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
25	Germany	4	2	0	0	2	1.0%
26	Hungary	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
27	Norway	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
28	Russia	3	2	1	0	0	0.7%
29	Spain	3	2	0	0	1	0.7%
30	Switzerland	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
31	UK	2	1	1	0	0	0.5%
	<b>Oceania</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0.7%</b>
32	Australia	1	1	0	0	0	0.2%
33	New Zealand	2	1	0	0	1	0.5%
	<b>No specific country</b>	<b>264</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>126</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>63.9%</b>
	<b>Total</b>	<b>413</b>	<b>166</b>	<b>171</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>100.0%</b>

Excluding the No Specific Country items, Japan had the highest number of cultural materials in the context of the 4P's included in the series among the 33 countries featured (14.3%). The non-Japanese cultural materials included in the textbook series accounted for 21.8% of the foreign cultural materials included. Thus, the findings showed that more non-Japanese than Japanese cultural materials were depicted in the *Let's try!* series. Each non-Japanese country was represented in less than 4% of all the cultural materials. Regarding cultural materials, those about the US were the most frequently featured (3.1%), followed by India (2.2%) and China and Korea (1.9% each).

Compared with Davidson and Liu's findings (2018), which showed that only 19 non-Japanese countries were featured in the *Hi, friends!* series, the findings of the present study showed that the *Let's try!* series included more materials on foreign culture and language in spite of the fact that the latter textbook series was developed based on the former. This point was a welcome improvement on the textbooks' design. However, a

disproportionate number of non-Japanese countries' symbols in the context of the 4P's were featured in the *Let's try!* textbooks. From a regional point of view, based on the United Nations Statistics Division (United Nations, n.d.), Asian countries were the most frequently featured in the *Let's try!* series. This may be that Japan is in Asia, and other Asian countries are geographically close to Japan. European countries are the second most frequently featured. Despite the fact that there are many countries in Africa, the cultures of only two African countries were included in the textbooks.

### Discussion

The content analysis of the *Let's try!* series revealed that only eight foreign words other than English words were included. Even though the Courses of Study (MEXT, 2017) stated that the English language should be taught, in principle, in the Foreign Language Activities, the curriculum and course were named Foreign Language Activities, not English Language Activities. Including only a small number of foreign language words other than English words in the textbooks may be problematic. Kubota (2002) argued that equating a foreign language with English may lead to the perception that English is superior to other foreign languages. Thus, the textbooks and the curriculum, which strongly focus on English language in the Foreign Language Activities, could instill in the perception that English is a superior and eminent foreign language compared with other foreign languages. Kimura (2016) asked why Foreign Language Activities set English language should be taught in principle, even though the goals of Foreign Language Activities was to deepen pupils' understanding of cultures in addition languages and to foster positive attitudes toward communication in foreign languages (MEXT, 2017). Kimura (2016) maintained that in the Foreign Language Activities, it was important not to overexpose pupils to English but to develop their attitudes towards multilingualism and expose various foreign languages. By doing so, Kimura (2016) proposed that pupils would be able to gain diverse perspectives that would enable them to keep pace with globalization. Hence, it would be necessary to increase the number of materials on non-English language and cultures in the Foreign Language Activities textbooks.

The findings of this study also showed that the four cultural dimensions were unevenly presented in the *Let's try!* series. According to Baker (2008), it is important to incorporate cultural topics that go beyond facts to promote students' cultural awareness. Davidson and Liu (2018) found that in the *Hi, friends!* series included more simple and knowledge-based cultural materials, which feature products and persons, than complex and conceptual cultural materials. Shin et al. (2011) found that knowledge-oriented content was often incorporated into beginner-level textbooks

rather than into intermediate or advanced textbooks. Despite this finding, the author of this present study believes that it is important to illustrate all cultural dimensions in the early grades of elementary school in the textbooks to help pupils develop a global cultural consciousness. Abstract concepts should be taught in accordance with pupils' developmental stages (Kato et al., 2016). Furthermore, teaching materials that include sufficient world cultural materials will support elementary school teachers in promoting their pupils' global cultural consciousness. Davidson and Liu (2018) found that, although the teachers realized that the *Hi, friends!* series neither reflected world culture nor encouraged global citizenships in pupils in a desirable way, they did not have sufficient time and energy to expand the cultural contents in their Foreign Language Activities classes. Due to the deficient cultural representations in the *Let's try!* series, teachers may find it difficult to educate their pupils about the cultural dimensions that are less often presented or not presented at all in the textbooks.

In addition, the findings of the present study showed that regional depictions in the textbooks were unbalanced, and there were few materials on African countries and cultures. Unbalanced regional depictions may lead Japanese pupils to obtain a biased image of the globalized world from their Foreign Language Activities classes. Walker and Martinez-Vargas (2020) argued that there is an epistemic structure grounded in a colonial system of evaluating knowledge, according to which Western-centric knowledge is often considered the most credible and valid. The results of the present study indicate that the distribution of Western-centric knowledge in the *Let's try!* series has decreased compared with the *Hi, friends!* series. Nevertheless, such knowledge still accounts for a large proportion of the knowledge items featured in the *Let's try!* series. By including more images that show Asians and Europeans using English as a second or foreign language, textbooks might imply that Asians and Europeans are more proficient English learners than those in all other regions. Underfeatured regions, such as the African countries, are thus hermeneutically marginalized. This unbalanced cultural depiction constitutes an epistemic condition that Byskov (2020) defined as a situation in which certain individuals are discriminated against as knowers, even though they possess relevant knowledge about the subject matter. The copyrighted textbooks must include fair cultural representations of world cultures to avoid fostering potential grounds for prejudice among pupils. Therefore, future copyrighted textbooks need to include more cultural materials about other countries and feature more varied cultural dimensions, to increase pupils' cultural awareness in this globalized world.

## Conclusion

To become proficient global communicators, it is necessary to equip pupils with multicultural perspectives and to raise their cultural awareness through textbooks. However, in Japan, current Foreign Language Activities textbooks focus on simple knowledge-based cultural materials and provide minimal exposure to complex cultural materials, which is not enough to develop global cultural awareness through critical cultural reflections (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Teaching materials and textbooks need to include equal representation of all cultural dimensions of foreign cultures, including the 4P's. Since culture is a complex reality, foreign language teaching materials should contribute to the development of global cultural awareness. Providing sufficient representations of various cultural elements in the early years of elementary school education will ensure that pupils will become sufficient knowers with a global cultural consciousness.

This study was not able to inspect the digital *Let's try!* textbooks or to collect qualitative data from teachers to determine how they supplemented the textbooks in the classroom. Thus, the discussion of these matters is thus left to future research.

It is hoped that the findings presented in this paper regarding the deficient cultural dimension representations and unbalanced foreign countries representations in the *Let's try!* series will be of some use for future textbooks and materials development. The findings may help convince MEXT and textbook publishers to create a future textbook series that encourages pupils to think critically about cultural complexities and to develop a global cultural consciousness through their foreign language education.

## Bio Data

**Ochiai Yoshimi** is an English teacher at Ritsumeikan University in Shiga, Japan, and holds a master's degree in TESOL from SIT Graduate Institute in Vermont, USA. She is currently an MA student in Education and Social Justice at Lancaster University, UK. This study was conducted as an assignment for her MA course.  
<ochiai-y@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp>

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