Analysis of Model Conversations in Junior High School Textbooks

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One of the main goals of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)'s new *Courses of Study* is that students should acquire communication skills that can be utilised in real life communication using their knowledge of foreign languages (MEXT, 2017). This study examined the extent to which the latest English language textbooks in Japan are aligned with that goal. In particular, the structures of the model conversations presented in the new textbooks were compared with those of the old textbooks to ascertain how the new textbooks develop learners' ability to conduct longer and meaningful conversations. The results reflected differences between the textbooks. Some textbooks had more dialogue turns, while others had more follow-up comments and questions in the dialogue. It is anticipated that students will be provided with many opportunities to practise the model conversations in class.

　文部科学省が改訂した中学校学習指導要領の主な目標の一つは、外国語の知識を活用し、実際のコミュニケーションにおいて外国語を活用できるようになることである（文部科学省, 2017）。そこで本研究は、最新の検定英語教科書の、この目標に対する対応を調査した。特に、新しい教科書で提示されているモデル会話の構成を旧教科書と比較し、新しい教科書が学習者の「話すこと」における「コミュニケーションを図る資質・能力」の育成を、どのように助けているのか分析を試みた。その結果、教科書によって違いがあることがわかった。対話のターンが多い教科書もあれば、フォローアップ・コメントやクエスチョンが多く見られる教科書もあった。今後、授業中にモデル会話を練習する機会を多く設けることで、コミュニケーション能力の向上を図ることが期待される。

The *Courses of Study* are the national curriculum standards in Japan. They state the objectives of the different levels of educational systems in the country, and aim to ensure consistency in education at elementary, junior high, and high school levels. The MEXT issued the revised *Courses of Study* for junior high schools in 2017. One of the overall objectives of *foreign languages* in the new *Courses of Study* (MEXT, n.d.) is as follows:

> To cultivate the ability to understand simple information and thoughts etc. about everyday and social topics in foreign languages, utilize these to express themselves, and communicate in accordance with the purposes, scenes and situations in which the communication is taking place. (p. 1)

Furthermore, the new *Courses of Study* (MEXT, n.d.) state that one of the elements which *English language* education should include is "forming thoughts while organising information, expressing oneself and communicating" (MEXT, n.d., p. 5). The guidelines suggest that learners will achieve this skill through "activities to properly respond on the spot to questions regarding topics in which they are interested from the person they are communicating with and to continue a back-and-forth conversation through asking relevant questions" (MEXT, n.d., p. 6).

Following the revised guidelines, the new government-authorised English textbooks for junior high schools were published by six publishers in 2021. Textbooks play an essential role in English classes. As Japanese students learn English as a foreign language and most of their teachers are non-native speakers, both students and teachers tend to rely on textbooks. As the newly published textbooks have been compiled according to the revised *Courses of Study*, using them will likely improve learners' communication abilities.

The first part of this paper reviews previous studies that have examined communicative competence and English textbooks since the 1970s. The second part of this paper presents tables, showing the results of counting the number of turns and

utterances in the new textbooks in comparison with the old ones. The third part of this paper analyses five types of utterances that feature in the new textbooks.

Communicative Competence and Written Discourse Analysis

Many Japanese-speaking students learn English as a means of communication, the need for which is increasingly worldwide. Hymes (1972) investigated the social aspects of languages germane to communicative abilities, and suggested that when people speak, they must not only produce grammatical sentences, but should also choose appropriate sentences that fit the occasion. Since non-native speakers learn English as a communication tool, improving their communication skills is key.

Following Hymes, Canale (1983) proposed that communicative competence consists of four competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence. Canale (1983) described discourse competence as being a "mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres" (p. 9). Thus, competence in discourse refers to the ability to coherently produce and participate in discourses.

Later, Young (2011) introduced *interactional competence* and suggested its importance for establishing rapport with another speaker. It would be ideal for learners to not only acquire grammatical knowledge but also the ability to exchange meaningful thoughts to deepen mutual understanding (Nakamura, 2014).

English textbooks play an important role in Japan, as English is not often natively spoken by teachers, and existing literature confirms that English textbooks used in Japan have been previously examined. For instance, Negishi (1990) compared the English textbooks published by Japanese publishers and those published in other countries. He found that the latter contained more diverse discourse structures than the former. The analysis suggested that this was partly because of the inclusion of a set number of grammar items on each page of the textbooks, and partly because vocabulary limits have been set by MEXT.

McCarthy (1991) concluded that "Discourse analysis is thus fundamentally concerned with the relationship between language and the contexts of its use" (p.10), and introduced the following labels in that regard: *initiation,* which is the first move in each dialogue; *response,* which is the answer; and a *follow-up* as the next response. Table 1 shows some examples of a brief but complete discourse, furnished by McCarthy (1991, p. 16).

Table 1
Examples of Labelling

Move	Exchange 1	Exchange 2	Exchange 3
Initiation	A: What time is it?	A: Tim's coming tomorrow.	A: Here, hold this.
Response	B: Six-thirty.	B: Oh yeah.	B: (takes the box)
Follow-up	A: Thanks	A: Yes.	A: Thanks.

Several studies have employed McCarthy's labelling system to analyse dialogues in English textbooks in Japan. For instance, Ito et al. (1994) analysed the dialogues in English textbooks published in 1993 for junior high schools. Those dialogues' structures were often simple and lacked development or natural language use. The study revealed that 70.3% of the total number of dialogues exhibited three patterns: *initiation*, *initiation+response*, and *responding+adding*; additionally, the dialogues generally involved *initiating* of the dialogue by a speaker and *responding* by the communication partner.

Yamamori et al. (2003) examined conversational structures from the perspective of practical communication skills in nine textbooks, published by three publishers for junior high schools in 2002. The researchers analysed the roles of the utterances in the textbooks' dialogues. Their research revealed that, in the English textbooks *New Horizon* and *Sunshine*, the main flow of discourse structure was *initiate*, *response*, and then *re-open*. On the other hand, the main flow of discourse structure in *New Crown* was *focus, initiate,* and then *response.*

Recently, Shigyo et al. (2018) examined dialogue structures in four English e-textbooks for 3rd- to 6th-grade students in South Korean elementary schools where English was taught as a foreign language. They found that most dialogues in all grades consisted of two turns. However, dialogues became more systematic, longer and more complex as per the learners' cognitive and social development in higher grades. These differences in grades may help in fostering learners' communicative competence. Wood (2007) pointed out that "an important element of speech proficiency is fluency, commonly measured by temporal variables of speech such as speed, pauses, and length of runs of speech" (p. 1).

While many studies have been conducted on old textbooks, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have been conducted to investigate how the new English textbooks for junior high schools in Japan are aligned with the goal of the new *Courses of Study* of 2017. It therefore is important to analyse how the presentation of discourses in the new textbooks help achieve this goal.

Purpose of This Study

The main aim of this study was to investigate the extent to which the new textbooks improve learners' spoken interaction, which is one of the main objectives of the new *Courses of Study*. The *Courses of Study* require teachers to guide activities, which entails learners having conversations with each other on matters pertaining to learning and interest by responding appropriately on the spot, or by asking relevant questions in response to statements from others. This implies that conversation examples should be provided in the new textbooks. When learners increasingly use *follow-up comments*, *follow-up questions*, and *adding*, their conversations tend to last longer. Therefore, the ability to continue a conversation can be ascertained by the ways learners can apply these types of utterances.

Research Questions

This study aimed to examine the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the old and new textbooks differ with respect to discourse structures? Do the new textbooks provide longer dialogues, with turns being taken more often, to comply with the new curriculum guidelines?

RQ1: How do the old and new textbooks differ with respect to utterance types?

Materials

Among the six new government-approved English textbooks, three with a high market share for the 2021 academic year were chosen for this study because the nationwide expected market share of the three publishers for that academic year was 78.4% in total (Nakamura, 2021). They were: *New Horizon*, published by Tokyo Shoseki (44.5%); *Here We Go!*, published by Mitsumura Tosho (17.0%); and *New Crown*, published by Sanseido (16.9%).

The 3rd-grade textbooks were chosen because it was assumed that the 3rd-grade students could better converse in English than the 1st- and 2nd-grade students, as they have acquired a certain amount of vocabulary and grammatical knowledge in 1st- and 2nd-grades of junior high school English studies.

The old and new editions published by the same publishers were compared. Table 2 shows the codes of the 3rd-year junior high school English textbooks for the three textbooks listed above. Both the new and the older series of the English textbooks published by Tokyo Shoseki were titled *New Horizon*. The codes for the old and new 3rd-grade textbook are OT and NT, respectively. These textbooks will henceforth be referred to by these codes.

Table 2
Textbook Codes

Code	Title	Volume	Publisher	Year of Publication	Leading Author / Editor
OT	New Horizon	3	Tokyo Shoseki	2016	Kasajima, J.
NT	New Horizon	3	Tokyo Shoseki	2021	Kasajima, J.
OM	Columbus 21	3	Mitsumura Tosho	2016	Togo, K.
NM	Here We Go!	3	Mitsumura Tosho	2021	Ota, H.
OS	New Crown	3	Sanseido	2016	Negishi, M.
NS	New Crown	3	Sanseido	2021	Negishi, M.

Procedure and Results

First, the number of utterances, turns, and dialogues in the main units of each book were counted and recorded, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Analytical Items of Each Book

	OT	NT	OM	NM	OS	NS
Number of utterances	57	74	174	132	40	78
Number of dialogues	6	6	13	11	5	9
Number of turns	36	47	104	78	27	41

Second, the average number of turns and utterances per dialogue and the average number of utterances per turn were calculated because the number of main units differ depending on the textbook and simple comparisons could not be made (Table 4). The average number of turns in a dialogue's structure among the six textbooks was 6.31 (*SD* = 1.22, *Max* = 16, *Min* = 4). The average number of utterances that structure a dialogue

among the six textbooks was 10.58 utterances in a dialogue (*SD* = 2.12, *Max* = 25, *Min* = 4). The average number of utterances that structured a turn among the six textbooks, was 1.68 (*SD* = 0.17, *Max* = 2.50, *Min* = 1.17).

The results varied, but several trends were observed. For instance, the average number of turns per dialogue was higher in NT and NM than in OT and OM, respectively (Table 4). Thus, speakers are provided with more opportunities to learn back-and-forth interactions to keep a conversation going through the dialogues in the new textbooks.

Table 4
Average Number of Turns and Utterances Occurring Per Turn or Dialogue

	OT	NT	OM	NM	OS	NS
Average number of turns that structure a dialogue	6.00	7.83	7.00	7.09	5.40	4.56
Average number of utterances that structure a dialogue	9.50	12.33	13.00	12.00	8.00	8.67
Average number of utterances that structure a turn	1.58	1.57	1.86	1.69	1.48	1.90

Note. Rounded off to two decimal places.

Next, this study examined the types of utterances in the main units of the textbooks by referring to the classification system proposed by Shigyo et al. (2018). They categorised the utterances into four types (*initiation*, *response*, *follow-up comment*, and *adding*), to examine the roles of each utterance. In addition to the above-mentioned four types, another utterance classification, *follow-up question* type, was added in this study. This was done because this paper endeavoured to ascertain how new textbooks dealt with one of the key objectives of the new *Courses of Study*, namely, to foster the ability to continue back-and-forth conversations using relevant questions. Examples of the five utterance types extracted from the three new textbooks are provided in Table 5.

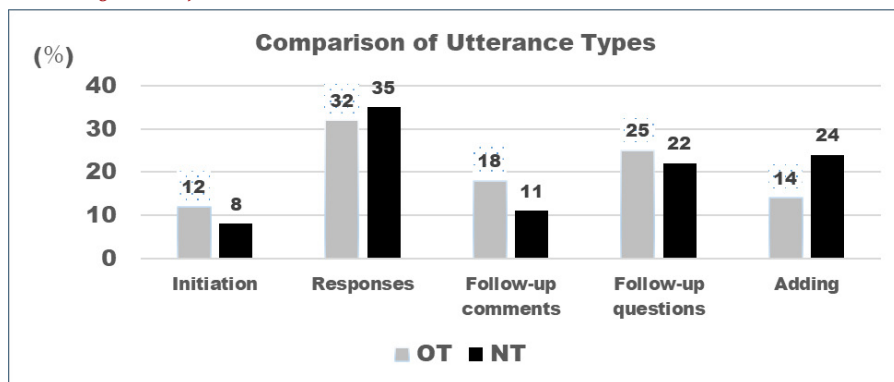**Table 5**
Additional Examples of Labelling

Move	Exchange 1 (NT, p. 10)	Exchange 2 (NM, p. 14)	Exchange 3 (NS, p. 22)
Initiation	A: Have you ever seen the Paralympic Games?	A: What are you looking at?	A: We're here!
Response	B: Yes, I have.	B: It's a website.	B: We have finally arrived in Miyajima.
Adding		B: It's called "School Life Around the World."	C: Look, there are some deer over there.
Follow-up comment			D: They're not afraid of people at all.
Follow-up question	A: Have you been to a Paralympic event?		

Each utterance type in the main dialogues of the textbooks was then entered into an Excel spreadsheet, and the percentage of occurrences was calculated based on the total number of utterances, as depicted in Figures 1-3. The percentages of either one or two of the utterance types in the main dialogues increased in the new textbooks; therefore, the objectives of continuing a dialogue could be achieved by any of these three.

For instance, Figure 1 shows that the percentage of *adding* was higher in NT than OT. This could lead to speakers having more positive attitudes about continuing their dialogues. Some Japanese speakers' utterances at this level tend to be limited to the bare minimum. For instance, they only reply to a question with *Yes, it is* or *No, it isn't*. Thus, adding information reflects their enthusiasm to continue engaging in conversations.

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Figure 1
Percentages (%) of Utterances in Each Textbook

Note. Rounded off to one decimal place.

Figure 2 shows that the percentage of *follow-up questions* was higher in NM than OM, at the expense of *follow up comments* and *adding* types. This may be related to the fact that the average number of turns per dialogue in NM was higher than OM (see Table 4).

Figure 2
Percentages (%) Utterances in Each Textbook
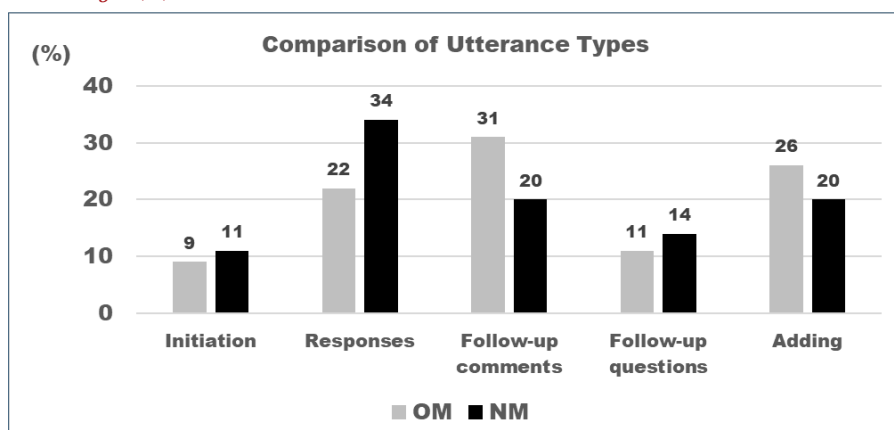
Note. Rounded off to one decimal place.

Figure 3 shows that the percentages of *follow-up* and *adding* were higher in NS than OS. By studying and repeating model conversations, learners should be able to learn how to develop meaningful conversations. In English language classes, instructors will therefore need to encourage students to actively develop not only the language, but also their contextualisation during their English language conversations.

Figure 3
Percentages (%) Utterances in Each Textbook
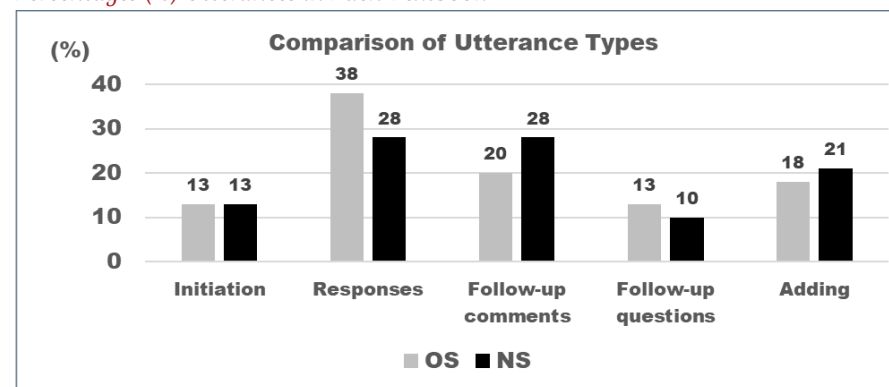
Note. Rounded off to one decimal place.

Discussion

Notably, the average number of turns per dialogue increased in two of the new 3rd-grade textbooks under study, compared to the old textbooks. This would encourage learners to participate actively in relation to the topic of that conversation. A slight decrease in the average number of utterances in a single turn in a conversation in two of the three new textbooks was observed. It would be ideal to have a longer utterance in a single turn of speech with a greater number of turns in a conversation which can provide opportunities to the speakers to respond and can also help them establish closer relationships with each other.

Of the three analysed textbooks, two textbooks showed a decrease in the number of *follow-up comments*, while two textbooks showed a decrease in the number of *follow-up questions*. The occurrence of *follow-up* utterances could be increased in future textbooks, because conversations with questions and answers could deepen mutual understanding.

If speakers are unsure of or interested in something that their communication partner has conveyed, they can pose questions to seek clarity regarding the content or ask further questions and make comments regarding their points of interest. This may inform the other person that their speaking partner is listening with interest to what they are saying, which can lead to smoother communication. To fulfil this objective, the textbooks should include more expressions that can be used during classroom activities which learners can practice repeatedly.

Conclusion

The new *Courses of Study* emphasise strengthening learners' communication abilities and encouraging them to engage in back-and-forth interactions to keep a conversation going. This study explored how newly published textbooks accomplish the goals of the new *Courses of Study*. The dialogues of three new editions of popular English textbooks and their older editions were analysed. The results revealed that more opportunities are provided in the new textbooks for practice than with the previous editions.

Two popular textbooks have more turns per dialogue compared to their older counterparts. Thus, students can enjoy more opportunities to practice continuing conversations using back-and-forth dialogues with newly published textbooks, than they did with the older versions.

When the dialogue utterance types were analysed, it was found that the new textbooks in general provide more utterance types of *follow-up comments*, *follow-up question*, and *adding* than old ones. Teachers should provide additional model conversations with these utterance types, and allocate sufficient time in class to ensure that learners benefit from those practice sessions and improve their ability to engage in natural and meaningful dialogue.

Limitations

This study examined only six Japanese junior high school English textbooks for a single grade, published by three publishers. Future studies should examine textbooks for other grades published by different publishers to build on these results. Furthermore, when counting the numbers of dialogues, utterances, and turns in textbooks, categorisation should be done by more than two researchers to establish more validation.

Bio Data

Keiko Nakamura has worked at a junior high school in Tokyo. She currently works as a part-time English instructor at several universities in the Kanto area, Japan. Her research interests pertain to learners' motivation and English textbooks for junior high school. <keiko.nakamura.2022@gmail.com>

Acknowledgments

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