

Pragmatic Knowledge in Japanese High School EFL Textbooks

Chie Kawashima

Oyama Johnan High School

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Textbooks are a cornerstone of language instruction. This study aims to explore the most recently published ministry-approved EFL textbook series used in Japanese high schools to examine the extent to which they support the development of learners' pragmatic competence. The study examines the types of pragmatic knowledge introduced in the selected textbooks, how the identified pragmatic knowledge is presented and practiced in these textbooks, and whether or not the inclusion of pragmatic knowledge progresses or expands within the series according to learners' grades. The data comprises instances of explicit mentions of pragmatic knowledge such as the use of speech acts and conversation strategies introduced in the selected textbooks. Analysis through quantification and categorization revealed that the inclusion of pragmatic knowledge is inconsistent across the series. Opportunities for learners to practice using such language through various types of pragmatic knowledge are limited. Furthermore, the amount of pragmatic knowledge presented does not consistently increase as students advance through school years, either within or across the series. These findings suggest that teachers should maximize the potential of these materials but also supplement and adapt them to better foster pragmatic competence, using their professional insights into pragmatic knowledge.

教科書は語学教育の要である。本研究は、日本国内の高等学校で使用されている最新の英語の検定教科書シリーズを分析し、学習者の語用論的能力養成にいかん重点が置かれているかを検証した。本研究で収集したデータは、調査目的のために選定した教科書の中で明示的に述べられている発話行為の種類ならびに会話のストラテジーといった語用論的知識の例である。データの数量化および種類ごとの分類を通して分析を行った結果、多様な語用論的知識が含まれているにも関わらず、その包括には一貫性がなく、学習者の言語使用の練習機会が不足していることが明らかになった。さらに、学習者の学年が上がるにつれて語用論的知識の増加や取り扱いにおける一貫性の欠如が判明した。学習者の目標言語での語用論的能力を養成するためには、教師が自身の見識を用いて、教材の可能性を十分に生かし、欠如している部分を補うことが必要とされる。

Pragmatics is the study of speaker meaning, contextual meaning, and communicative action within social contexts (Horn & Ward, 2006; Kasper, 1997; Yule, 1996). It also involves understanding how literal and implied meanings are interpreted (Yule, 2022). Developing pragmatic competence is essential for learners to communicate effectively in a second language (L2), as it extends beyond grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Barron et al., 2024).

Developing pragmatic competence is a crucial goal in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning. In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) outlines that the primary objective of foreign language instruction at the secondary education level is not only to understand the target language but to use it effectively. The latest Course of Study (2018) for senior high school English education emphasizes “communication abilities,” aiming for students to reach a level where they can appropriately convey information, ideas, and more. One of the key skills for effective communication in the L2 is pragmatic competence, which is defined as “knowledge of communicative action and how to carry it out, and the ability to use language appropriately according to context” (Kasper, 1997, para. 5). This competence, alongside grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, is a component of communicative competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1982). Thus, fostering learners' pragmatic ability is essential to meet the instructional goals set by the MEXT.

Despite the importance of pragmatic competence as a core aspect of communicative competence, it is often absent from language curricula, textbooks, and assessments (Roever, 2021). Moreover, there is a lack of dedicated sections for pragmatics in most language textbooks, which serve the pivotal role as resources (ibid). This study aims to investigate a recently published series of ministry-approved EFL textbooks used in Japanese high schools to assess how well they support the development of pragmatic competence and to identify how teachers might address any missing elements and adapt the materials.

Literature Review

Pragmatic Competence

Pragmatic competence is a core component of communicative competence, which early models describe as comprising three main components: (1) grammatical competence, (2) pragmatic competence, and (3) sociolinguistic competence (Bachman & Palmer, 1982, p. 450). Pragmatic competence is defined as “the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context” (Thomas, 1983, p. 92). This division fits into Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) model of language ability, and the model comprises organizational knowledge—covering grammar and textual elements—as well as a construct they label as pragmatic knowledge. Pragmatic knowledge, in turn, has two subcomponents: functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Functional knowledge, also known as illocutionary competence, allows individuals to interpret relationships between utterances and speaker meaning. Sociopragmatic knowledge, on the other hand, involves the ability to use and interpret language according to particular social and cultural contexts.

Issues of Pedagogical Materials

Pedagogical materials are central to language teaching programs and serve as the primary source of language input and practice within the classroom (McGrath, 2013). Numerous studies evaluating secondary education materials have highlighted issues regarding the inclusion or treatment of pragmatic knowledge. Many published textbooks offer limited inclusion of pragmatics. Nearly two decades ago, McGroarty and Taguchi (2005) noted a lack of coverage of manipulative functions and opportunities for learners to practice pragmatic knowledge communicatively in the subject of oral communication textbooks used in Japanese high schools. They argued that relying solely on mechanical or structured exercises may hinder the development of learners’ ability to use the target language appropriately outside the classroom. Similarly, Shimizu et al. (2007) examined the presentation of speech acts in Japanese high school Oral Communication textbooks and noticed that learners were provided with limited opportunities to practice language use in different situations in these textbooks. They emphasized the need for learners to be exposed to a wider range of language use situations to make appropriate language choices, and they underscored the critical role of pedagogical materials as both a source of input and a platform for output practice.

Moreover, a number of studies have identified issues with textbooks related to the inclusion of pragmatic knowledge, contextual factors, and the treatment of pragmatic content. Roohani and Alipour (2017) investigated Iranian high school ELT textbooks and observed an uneven inclusion of speech acts across the books. They also pointed out that speech acts were often presented out of context, which they argued could make it difficult for learners to choose appropriate language, especially regarding levels of politeness. Similarly, Mizushima (2016) noted that Japanese high school English expression subject textbooks, where learners can practice speaking and writing, often presented speech acts as isolated single sentences without contextual information. She stated that without contextualized input, developing learners’ pragmatic competence could be difficult. In another study, Tran and Yeh (2020) found that Vietnamese EFL textbooks often presented decontextualized speech acts with oversimplified examples of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts and minimal information on formality and interlocutor relations. Their findings suggested the importance of teacher involvement and appropriate classroom activities to supplement textbook content. Likewise, Nu (2018) found not only limited coverage of pragmatic information but also a lack of inclusion of contextual factors along with explicit pragmatic guidance to practice language use in Vietnamese upper-secondary EFL textbooks. She suggested the necessity of incorporating the tasks which enhance learners’ pragmatic knowledge with different levels of cognitive processes.

More recently, Wilson (2023) studied Hong Kong school textbooks observing that speech acts were not the focus of instruction and were covered minimally and inconsistently. He found an imbalance between direct and indirect speech acts with more than half of the presented speech acts being direct and linked to grammar items. Additionally, learners were expected to memorize textbook content rather than use speech acts in personalized ways, which may hinder their improvement of pragmatic abilities. He emphasized the necessity of modification of the tasks presented in the textbooks with teachers’ pragmatic knowledge. Similarly, Jiang and Deng (2022) analyzed speech acts in Chinese high school EFL textbooks and noted limited coverage, with directive and expressive speech acts dominating over commissive and declarative ones. They also observed that speech acts were presented at the phrase level often lacking contextual details such as speaker-hearer relations, which may make it difficult for learners to choose appropriate language use in real-life interactions.

Many English language teaching (ELT) textbooks present only limited pragmatic information. In EFL contexts, where learners have limited exposure to authentic use of their target language, textbooks are often the only sources of input for learners and of

opportunities to practice in the target language (Nguyen, 2011). As such, they function as a framework and de facto syllabus to guide the classroom instruction (Soleimani & Dabbghi, 2012). Decades ago, Sheldon (1988) stated that textbooks were more credible in the eyes of students than teacher-generated or in-house materials. According to Tomlinsion (2003), language learning materials including printed textbooks should provide learners with information about language use, language use experience, and language use discovery. Thus, it is necessary to evaluate language textbooks, especially those used in EFL contexts to identify limitations and potential for supporting pragmatic language instruction.

Aim of Study and Research Questions

Previous studies aforementioned have pointed out a lack of pragmatic information in pedagogical materials and an insufficient treatment of pragmatic knowledge in practice activities. In response, the new MEXT's Course of Study for Japanese school education (2018), implemented in 2022, introduced substantial revisions to the content of authorized EFL textbooks. These updates replaced detailed linguistic explanations spanning several pages with model conversations and communicative activities.

The aim of this study is to examine the coverage of pragmatic knowledge and the opportunities available in these newly revised Japanese high school EFL textbooks for learners to practice pragmatic knowledge through communicative activities. Additionally, this study explores the potential for developing learners' pragmatic abilities as they progress through each grade level.

In order to address the issues regarding the inclusion and treatment of pragmatic information in EFL textbooks, the following three research questions are established:

- RQ1. What types of pragmatic knowledge are introduced in the selected EFL textbooks?
- RQ2. How is the identified pragmatic knowledge presented and practiced in these textbooks?
- RQ3. Does the inclusion of pragmatic knowledge progress or expand within a series as learners advance through grade levels?

Method

Data Collection

The data analyzed in this study consisted of instances of pragmatic knowledge presented in the selected series of Japanese high school EFL textbooks: *Vista I*, *Vista II*, *All Aboard I*, and *All Aboard II* (listed in the Appendix). These textbooks are the most recently published and prescribed under the new Course of Study implemented in 2022. These textbooks were selected based on the results of informal interviews with representatives from the school textbook publishers, who regularly visit schools and consult with teachers on available materials. The primary users of these selected textbooks are vocational high school students, many of whom are likely to enter the workforce directly after graduation. Thus, their English language classes in high school might be the last opportunity for formal language instruction.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted on both individual books and series as a whole. Initially, the study identified and quantified instances of explicit mentioning pragmatic knowledge such as speech acts, pragmatic markers, and language use strategies. These instances were then categorized according to the types of pragmatic knowledge they represented. Additionally, the study examined the format in which each instance was introduced (e.g., in dialogue or prose) and determined whether the identified pragmatic knowledge was accompanied by practice tasks and whether those tasks were contextualized.

To facilitate analysis, the identified data were tabulated in an Excel spreadsheet, which included the following details for each instance:

- Page number where the instance was recorded
- Unit number
- Type of pragmatic knowledge explicitly mentioned
- Specific instances identified
- Instructions for any associated practice tasks
- Contextual information for practice tasks if available

Once tabulated, the data allowed for both quantitative and qualitative analyses to determine the range of pragmatic knowledge presented and to compare its frequency and distribution across the textbooks and series.

The textbooks were organized into two series (*Vista* and *All Aboard*), and all identified instances of pragmatic knowledge including those appearing infrequently, were recorded. For pragmatic features that appeared only once, it was assessed whether these features were recycled throughout the textbooks.

The focus of analysis was then shifted to how each instance of pragmatic knowledge was treated within the textbooks. For each recorded instance, the study examined whether practice tasks were provided and, if so, assessed the degree of communicative engagement required. At the same time, how these tasks were contextualized was assessed by examining power dynamics and social proximity of interlocutors based on the following categorization:

- **Close-Equal:** Friend or sibling relationships
- **Close-Unequal:** Parent-child relationships
- **Distant-Equal:** Interactions mainly in service encounters
- **Distant-Unequal:** Teacher-student or doctor-patient interactions

These categories helped determine how the relational context influenced the pragmatic use of language in each task.

Finally, the study investigated how the inclusion of pragmatic knowledge evolved as learners progress through the grades. This was achieved by comparing the frequency and types of pragmatic knowledge recorded across each textbook focusing on changes within and across the *Vista* and *All Aboard* series. This investigation aimed to identify trends and determine whether pragmatic competence-building increased in complexity and depth over successive school years.

Results

Types of Pragmatic Knowledge Introduced in Textbooks

Table 1 displays the coverage of pragmatic knowledge across each textbook. Overall, only a limited number of instances involving pragmatic knowledge were recorded throughout the selected textbooks. The most frequently included pragmatic knowledge was speech acts related to “opinions” and “requesting” as in *the Course of Study* (2018) such as agreement, asking for opinions, disagreement, exchanging opinions, expressing opinions, and expressions used for discussion. These speech acts appeared commonly across all the textbooks and in higher frequency. In addition, the speech act of requesting was notably prominent, appearing in three out of the four textbooks.

The inclusion of pragmatic knowledge was not consistent across the two series. As shown in Table 1, the *Vista* series contained far more instances of pragmatic knowledge than the *All Aboard* series both in quantity and variety. The *Vista* series included a broader range of pragmatic knowledge types with some types appearing multiple times whereas the same types were completely absent in the *All Aboard* series.

In addition to opinion-related and requesting speech acts, the *Vista* series included several expressive speech acts such as assessments, compliments, encouragement, and expressions of gratitude. Moreover, the *Vista* series incorporated pragmatic markers and strategies related to modification such as intensifying and mitigation, politeness, and language use in service encounters—features that were not present in the *All Aboard* series.

How Pragmatic Knowledge is Introduced and Practiced

How pragmatic knowledge was presented and practiced in each textbook is shown in Table 2. The majority of instances were structured as cloze dialogue exercises, which lacked a communicative design. These tasks primarily required learners to fill in blanks and read the dialogues aloud in pairs with minimal opportunity for learners to create their own dialogues or engage in pair or group discussions. *Vista II* included three phrasal-level instances of pragmatic knowledge without any practice tasks. At the same time, this textbook presented three tasks which encouraged creative expression specifically through activities involving the speech act of expressing opinions. These tasks instructed learners to write a speech manuscript encouraging a limited form of personalized output. The examples of the manuscript were present in prose.

Regarding contextual information, 18 out of 19 tasks in *Vista I* and 17 out of 23 in *Vista II* included information about speaker-hearer relationships. In contrast, the *All Aboard* series provided no such information in its practice tasks. Most of the speaker-hearer relations in the *Vista* series involved close-equal relationships such as friends or siblings. However, five tasks in each *Vista* textbook included asymmetrical relationships such as teacher-student dynamics or service encounters. Despite the inclusion of these speaker-hearer relationships, the contextual factors had no influence on the language used in the dialogues. The dialogues between speakers of different status or familiarity levels employed the same level of politeness as those between close equals. As a result, learners were rarely guided to practice pragmatic knowledge with an awareness of how language use should vary according to context.

Table 1
Number of Instances with Explicit Mentioning Pragmatic Knowledge

Explicit Mentioning Pragmatic Knowledge	Vista 1	All Aboard 1	Vista 2	All Aboard 2
Request	1		1	1
Seeking Agreement			1	
Seeking Permission				1
Assessment	1		1	
Compliment	1		3	
Encouragement			1	
Thanking			1	
Agreement	4		4	
Asking for Opinions	1		2	
Disagreement	1		1	
Exchanging Opinions		5		8
Expressing Opinions	1		5	
Expressions Used for Discussion			1	
Backchannels	2			
Filler			1	
Intensifying	1			
Mitigation	3		1	
Repairing			1	
Turn-giving			2	
Politeness	1			
Service Encounters	2			
Total	19	5	26	10

Table 2
Format in Treating Pragmatic Knowledge

Material	In Dialogue	In Prose	With Examples Only
Vista I	19		
Vista II	20	3	3
All Aboard I	5		
All Aboard II	10		

Progress or Expansion of Pragmatic Knowledge through Grade Level

As learners advance through each school year, there was an overall increase in both the number and variety of pragmatic knowledge instances across the textbooks as shown in Table 1. In both series, speech acts related to “opinions” were recycled throughout the series and new types of pragmatic knowledge were introduced in successive textbooks. However, the complexity of syntax structures remained the same throughout the two series. The speech act of request, additionally, in *Vista* was present in both the first and second series. This speech act appeared as a polar question in the first series, and as the syntax structure of “I want you to...” in the second series. Although these two different linguistic forms were introduced, the syntax structure for requesting also remained less complex and the use of this speech act was not related to the provided contextual factors.

Only in the *Vista* series, certain pragmatic markers and strategies were not consistently recycled; however, new instances of pragmatic knowledge involving pragmatic markers appear in the second textbook. This suggests a gradual expansion in the types of pragmatic knowledge presented as students’ grades progress though recycling remains selective rather than comprehensive within the series.

Discussion

The coverage of pragmatic knowledge in the two textbook series analyzed in this study was limited and the inclusion of this information was inconsistent across the series. This suggests that pragmatic language use is not a primary instructional target in these textbooks as Jiang and Deng (2022) and Wilson (2023) noted a limited coverage of speech acts and their practices in both primary and secondary school EFL textbooks. However,

both series commonly emphasized speech acts related to “opinions” as numerous instances were recorded across the series. The educational ministry highlights developing learners’ communicative abilities and particularly emphasizes fostering the ability to express their opinions on what they have heard and read. Consequently, “opinions” are a prominent focus in the *Course of Study* (2018) and the textbooks reflect efforts to provide learners with examples and tasks to practice this skill. Additionally, a notable presence of the speech act of “requesting” was observed. This speech act was introduced likely due to its compatibility with infinitives and polar questions making it an effective tool for grammar instruction.

The study also found some instances of pragmatic markers including backchannels, fillers, intensifiers, mitigators, repair strategies, and turn-giving cues. Pragmatic markers contribute to coherent and contextually appropriate speech by facilitating speaker-hearer relations and maintaining conversational flow (Brinton, 1996; Hellermann & Vergun, 2007). While grammatically optional, they are pragmatically essential for effective communication (Biber et al., 1999; Brinton, 1996). Previous research conducted by Vicov and Jakupcevic (2017) has highlighted the role of pragmatic markers in improving learners’ listening comprehension, yet they have hardly received pedagogical focus in EFL materials (Kawashima, 2023). Thus, even limited inclusion of explicit instruction on pragmatic markers in textbooks could offer valuable opportunities for learners to understand language use within real-world contexts. Additionally, the *Vista* series included communication strategies for service encounters and politeness strategies—areas often overlooked in EFL materials. The paucity of communication strategies in textbooks could make it challenging for learners to select appropriate language in authentic interactions.

As a whole, the limited coverage of pragmatic knowledge and inconsistent presentation across the series suggests that the instructional focus in Japanese high school EFL textbooks may be more on grammar and vocabulary than language use in real world. The *Vista* series provided significantly more exposure to pragmatic language use compared to the *All Aboard* series, and the users of the former series may have greater opportunities to develop awareness of pragmatic language use. However, the lack of systematic guidance on pragmatic instruction in the textbooks may leave educators without clear strategies for integrating pragmatic skills into classroom activities.

For the most part, pragmatic knowledge included in these textbooks was not interactively treated. The instances of pragmatic knowledge were presented mostly as cloze dialogues for read-aloud practice. Dubin and Olshtain (1986) categorized such cloze dialogue practices as a “mechanical operation”, which is less communicatively

designed. Even speech acts related to “opinions” were primarily practiced through this less interactive format. Consequently, it may be difficult to assert that these exercises fully align with the communicative requirements outlined by the MEXT. Nevertheless, the *Vista* series provided three instances of opinion-related expressions through communicative tasks labeled as “creative expression,” a category on the communicative potential scale (Dubin & Olshtain, 1986, pp. 98-99). These tasks were designed more for presentation rather than for interaction and limited their potential for developing interactive communicative skills.

Additionally, significant differences were noted between these two textbooks series regarding the inclusion of contextual information in practice tasks. The *Vista* series provided varied speaker-hearer relationships with differences in proximity and status although these distinctions did not directly influence language choice in the practice tasks. This series offered a wider range of pragmatic knowledge, which may help learners to become more aware of context-dependent language use. However, as Ishihara (2020) stated in her study of engaging learners in communicative practice and importance of output practice that awareness alone is insufficient to foster pragmatic competence; learners need opportunities to practice language in realistic contexts to develop these skills.

Overall, the lack of communicatively designed tasks and the minimal integration of contextual information may impede the development of learners’ pragmatic competence. Even where contextual information is included, developing learners’ pragmatic abilities may be difficult without opportunities to adjust language use based on interlocutors’ relationships.

As for development of pragmatic knowledge overtime, both textbook series showed an increase in instances of pragmatic knowledge as learners progressed through their school years. However, this increase was neither systematic within each series nor consistent across the two series. While both series incorporated more speech acts related to “opinions” and “requesting,” the complexity of these instances remained simplified even in the second series. According to Roever (2021), simple request structures such as “I’d like...” are teachable to A1-level learners while differentiating between casual and polite expressions should be accessible to A2-level learners. Given that the first series targets primarily A1-level learners and the second series targets A2, the textbooks may not fully reflect learners’ increasing proficiency levels by expanding pragmatic content accordingly.

This inconsistent increase in pragmatic knowledge with proficiency may have limited impact on fostering learners’ pragmatic competence and a more structured progression may be necessary to build these skills effectively.

Conclusion

First of all, this study examined the types of pragmatic knowledge across the selected ELT textbooks and identified 26 types of pragmatic knowledge. The coverage of pragmatic knowledge in these series was limited and only the speech acts related to “opinions” were commonly present all across the series. The study also found inclusion of a far broader range of pragmatic knowledge types in the *Vista* series. Pragmatic markers such as backchannels and fillers were recorded in this series in addition to speech acts. Although the inclusion of pragmatic markers provides precious opportunities to learn more authentic language use, these instances were not systematically integrated into the curriculum.

Next, the study investigated how the identified pragmatic knowledge was presented and practiced in these textbooks. The majority of pragmatic knowledge was presented in dialogues predominantly through read-aloud cloze exercises, **limiting learners’ opportunities for meaningful engagement**. Although some contextual information was provided, learners were not given adequate opportunities to select appropriate language use based on the relations with interlocutors. It may hinder their ability to be engaged in real-world communication.

Finally, progress or expansion of pragmatic knowledge within the series according to the learners’ grade levels was judged. While there was an observable increase in the variety of pragmatic knowledge as learners progressed through their grades, this inclusion was inconsistent particularly between these textbook series. Users of the *Vista* series benefited from exposure to a broader range of pragmatic knowledge fostering greater awareness of language use in diverse situations. Nevertheless, both series fell short in offering communicative practice aligned with various contexts, which is crucial for developing learners’ pragmatic competence.

The outcomes of this study suggest that educators should be aware of the limited inclusion of language use and potential values for pragmatic instruction in these textbooks to foster learners’ communicative competence in their target language. To bridge this gap, it is essential for language teachers to supplement textbook content with their own insights on pragmatic knowledge or lesson plans built based on specific literatures on pragmatics. By doing so, teachers can create richer, more contextually relevant learning experiences that help learners to select language use more effectively according to situational demands. This approach will not only enhance learners’ pragmatic skills but also prepare them for authentic interactions in English-speaking environments.

Bio Data

Chie Kawashima has 27 years of experience teaching high school in Tochigi Prefecture and is currently focused on communicative English teaching. Her research interest includes textbook analysis and interlanguage pragmatics in pedagogical contexts.

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Appendix

Textbooks Investigated in the Study

- Tokyo Shoseki (2021) *All Aboard English Communication I*
- Tokyo Shoseki (2022) *All Aboard English Communication II*
- Sanseido (2021) *Vista English Communication I*
- Sanseido (2022) *Vista English Communication II*