

Affirmative Modal Adverbs in English Textbooks Used in Japan

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This study examines how affirmative modal adverbs are treated in English textbooks in Japan from elementary through high school. Building on Takahashi (2025), it quantitatively analyzes the distribution and usage of modal adverbs in textbooks used in the 2023 academic year, with particular attention to affirmative modal adverbs and their pedagogical implications. Although modal adverbs play an important role in expressing speakers' stances in conversation, their treatment in textbooks has received limited attention. The findings indicate that while modal adverbs are introduced at the junior high school level, their usage is strongly biased toward *maybe*, and affirmative modal adverbs are rarely used. Comparison across the three generations of junior high school textbooks examined in this study indicates that modal-adverb use was the highest in the 1992 editions and that conversation sections in textbooks remained the primary genre in which modal adverbs occurred. Because affirmative modal adverbs can express certainty with a single word, exposure to such adverbs in earlier English education may help learners develop richer ways of expressing their thoughts.

本研究は、日本の小学校から高校までの英語教科書において、肯定的な法副詞がどのように扱われているかを明らかにすることを目的とする。Takahashi (2025) による2023年度使用教科書の話者指向副詞の調査を基に、法副詞の分布と使用状況を数量的に分析し、特に肯定的な法副詞に焦点を当てて英語教育的観点から考察を行った。その結果、法副詞は中学校段階で導入されているものの、使用は*maybe*に大きく偏っており、肯定的な法副詞は小学校および中学校の教科書ではほとんど扱われていないことが明らかになった。また、調査対象とした3世代の中学校教科書を比較した結果、法副詞は1992年版で最も多く用いられており、いずれの世代でも主に会話で使用されていることが明らかになった。肯定的な法副詞は一語で強い確信を表すことができるため、小中学校の英語教育においてこれらの副詞に触れ、自分の思いを豊かに表現する方法を学ぶことは重要であると考えられる。

Adverbs play an important role in expressing speakers' feelings and opinions in a nuanced manner and serve various discourse functions, such as facilitating smoother and more coherent communication. Although English has a relatively fixed word order, adverbs introduce flexibility into sentence structure and support the flow of information (Suzuki, 2023). In this sense, adverbs enable speakers to convey what they think and feel more openly. Accordingly, the ability to use adverbs appropriately across a range of communicative situations is considered essential for effective communication.

According to the Course of Study, Japan's national curriculum guidelines (MEXT, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), the enhancement of communicative competence in English is a central goal of English education in Japan. However, despite this emphasis, explicit guidance on adverb instruction remains limited, particularly beyond the teaching of frequency adverbs at the elementary school level. In particular, affirmative modal adverbs that express strong confidence or affirmation may play an important role in encouraging interlocutors and facilitating positive interpersonal communication. Given this situation, an important question arises: How are adverbs—especially affirmative modal adverbs that express speakers' strong positive stance—introduced in English education in Japan?

This study builds on Takahashi (2025) by focusing specifically on affirmative modal adverbs. The term “modal adverb,” as defined by Bellert (1977), refers to an adverb that expresses the speaker's judgment of the likelihood of a proposition. In the present study, the term affirmative modal adverb is used to refer to modal adverbs that express a high degree of confidence or affirmation toward a proposition. This study examines the treatment of these adverbs in authorized English textbooks used in Japan, in comparison with frequency adverbs, subject-oriented adverbs, and other types of speaker-oriented adverbs.

This study suggests that English education in Japan would benefit from increasing exposure to affirmative modal adverbs, raising learners' awareness of their pragmatic functions in conversation, and encouraging their active use in communicative contexts. Building on these findings, the present study examines the pedagogical implications of

affirmative modal adverbs, with particular attention to the types of affirmative modal adverbs that may help learners express positive attitudes with confidence.

Literature Review

Because adverbs constitute a diverse and complex grammatical category, they have not been sufficiently researched or systematically taught in the field of textbook research in Japan. This difficulty can be attributed to the wide range of functions and usages that adverbs encompass. In order to analyze adverbs in textbooks in a theoretically coherent manner, this study adopts a linguistic framework for adverb classification. Several influential classifications have been proposed in the literature (Bellert, 1977; Cinque, 1999; Greenbaum, 1969; Huddleston & Pullum, 2002; Jackendoff, 1972; Nakau, 1980; Quirk et al., 1985). Among these, the classifications proposed by Jackendoff (1972) and Bellert (1977) are particularly suitable for concisely and consistently categorizing the complex distribution of adverbs in textbooks from both syntactic and semantic perspectives.

Jackendoff (1972) classified adverbs into four groups: speaker-oriented, subject-oriented, manner, and adverbs restricted to auxiliary positions. Building on this framework, Bellert (1977) further subdivided speaker-oriented adverbs into five categories: modal, evaluative, conjunctive, pragmatic, and domain adverbs. Among these subcategories, modal, evaluative, and conjunctive adverbs are considered especially important in the context of English education because of their role in expressing stance, evaluation, and discourse relations.

According to Bellert (1977), modal adverbs express the speaker's judgment regarding the truth or likelihood of a proposition and include items such as “probably,” “possibly,” “certainly,” “surely,” and “evidently.” Similar semantic groupings are also found in the classifications of Nakau (1980) and Huddleston and Pullum (2002). In the present study, this subset is referred to as *affirmative modal adverbs*, namely modal adverbs that express a high degree of confidence or affirmation toward a proposition, such as “definitely,” “certainly,” “clearly,” and “absolutely.” Although these adverbs differ in their semantic and pragmatic nuances (Konishi, 1989), they are treated as a single analytical category in the present study because they all express a high degree of certainty or confidence regarding the truth of a proposition.

Previous international research on foreign language textbooks has demonstrated that the language used in textbooks differs from actual usage in authentic communication (Barbieri & Eckhardt, 2007; Gilmore, 2004; Winter & Le Foll, 2022). Both domestic and

international studies have also examined the use of specific parts of speech or lexical items in textbooks (Bouhlal et al., 2018; Mano & Suzue, 2018; Morita et al., 2019; Oktavianti & Sarage, 2021; Phoocharoensil, 2017). These studies have investigated the relationship between the frequency of particular grammatical categories or linguistic features in textbooks and learner acquisition (Mano & Suzue, 2018; Morita et al., 2019), as well as the gap between textbook usage and actual English use by compiling textbook corpora and comparing them with large-scale language corpora that reflect authentic usage (Bouhlal et al., 2018; Oktavianti & Sarage, 2021; Phoocharoensil, 2017).

Despite this expanding literature, the use of speaker-oriented adverbs in Japanese English textbooks has not been sufficiently examined. Although Takahashi (2025) provided a comprehensive overview of adverb use in Japanese English textbooks, the presentation of affirmative modal adverbs has not yet been investigated in detail. The previous study revealed that, particularly at the introductory stage in junior high school, textbook instruction on modal adverbs is heavily centered on “maybe,” with affirmative modal adverbs receiving little attention. Building on this gap, the present study provides a detailed analysis of affirmative modal adverbs in Japanese English textbooks, with particular attention to their distribution, use, and pedagogical implications.

Methodology

This study investigates adverb usage in English textbooks used in Japan from elementary through high school. In particular, it examines how modal adverbs are used in comparison with frequency adverbs, subject-oriented adverbs, and other types of speaker-oriented adverbs, including evaluative, conjunctive, domain, and pragmatic adverbs.

A total of 43 English textbooks used in Japanese elementary, junior high, and senior high schools were analyzed. The primary focus was on textbooks in use during the 2023 academic year. For junior high school, the three most widely adopted textbook series authorized in 2020 were selected based on adoption data reported by Kaede Production (2023b): *NEW HORIZON English Course* 1–3 (Tokyo Shoseki, 2021), *Here We Go! ENGLISH COURSE* 1–3 (Mitsumura Toshio, 2021), and *NEW CROWN English Series* 1–3 (Sanseido, 2021). For elementary school, textbooks from the same three publishers authorized in 2019 were examined: *NEW HORIZON Elementary English Course* 5–6 (Tokyo Shoseki, 2020), *Here We Go!* 5–6 (Mitsumura Toshio, 2020), and *CROWN Jr.* 5–6 (Sanseido, 2020). For senior high school, textbooks from two of the three publishers were analyzed: *CROWN English Communication I* (Sanseido, 2022), *CROWN English*

Communication II (Sanseido, 2023), *CROWN English Communication III New Edition* (Sanseido, 2019), *ENRICH LEARNING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION I* (Tokyo Shoseki, 2022), *ENRICH LEARNING ENGLISH COMMUNICATION II* (hereafter *EL II*: Tokyo Shoseki, 2023), and *PROMINENCE English Communication III* (Tokyo Shoseki, 2019). Because Mitsumura Toshio does not publish senior high school English textbooks, only the senior high school textbooks published by these two publishers were included in the analysis.

To examine diachronic changes, earlier editions published by the same publishers were also analyzed. Authorized textbooks in Japan are compiled in accordance with the national Course of Study, which is revised approximately every ten years. For junior high school, textbooks authorized in 1992 and 2005 from the same three publishers were examined (18 textbooks in total). For senior high school, textbooks authorized in 2002 and 2003 for the senior-high-school courses, English I and English II, from the same publisher were analyzed. At that time, third-year high school English focused primarily on reading skills; therefore, only English I and English II, which were designed to develop the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, were included.

All textbooks were examined page by page, and adverbs were manually identified, counted, coded, and recorded in an Excel spreadsheet by the author. Adverbs appearing in the main texts, Japanese-language explanatory sections, and appendices were included, whereas adverbs listed in vocabulary sections or presented as new words in page margins were excluded. Following the initial coding, the entire dataset was reviewed at least once by the author to verify coding decisions and ensure consistency throughout the analysis.

Each occurrence of an adverb was coded for publisher, grade level, page number, adverb type, and genre of use. Because elementary school textbooks contain relatively limited written text, audio materials accessible via QR codes embedded in the textbooks were also analyzed. Audio materials that duplicated written textbook content were excluded; only audio data not explicitly written in the textbooks were included. In addition, audio scripts provided in junior high and high school textbooks were analyzed.

Adverbs were classified according to the genre in which they appeared. The main genre categories were conversation, expository text, essays/reports/letters, narratives, speeches, exercises, and grammatical explanations. Songs, audio scripts, and elementary school audio materials were treated as separate categories. Audio scripts were further classified into dialogue, speech, and essay types, whilst elementary school audio materials were categorized as conversation, expository text, speech, or chants. Although normalized

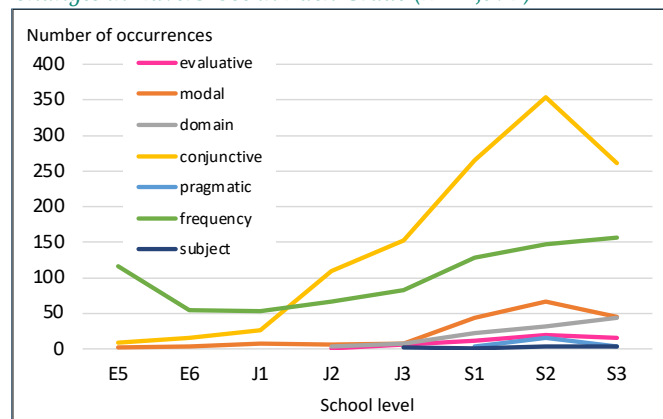
frequencies are commonly used in corpus studies, they were not adopted in the present study for two reasons. First, it was difficult to calculate the total number of words because the target adverbs appeared not only in English passages but also in Japanese-language explanatory sections. Second, modal adverbs, particularly affirmative modal adverbs, occurred only infrequently, and restricting the analysis to English passages alone would have further reduced the number of occurrences and limited meaningful comparison. Accordingly, the analysis was based on raw frequencies, as the purpose of the study was to compare learners' opportunities to encounter the target adverbs within each textbook used over the course of one academic year.

To examine whether adverb usage in textbooks reflects actual English usage, frequency and genre distribution were investigated using COCA. These corpus data were then compared with the textbook data.

Results

To capture how modal adverbs are treated in English textbooks used in Japan, I compared the use of modal adverbs in the 2023 textbooks from elementary through high school with that of frequency adverbs, subject-oriented adverbs, and other speaker-oriented adverbs, including evaluative, conjunctive, domain, and pragmatic adverbs. Figure 1 provides an overview of the introduction of different types of adverbs across school levels, thereby situating the subsequent analysis of modal adverbs within the overall patterns of their distribution. In the figure, E indicates elementary school, J junior high school, and S senior high school; the numbers following these letters represent grade levels. As shown in Figure 1, the types of adverbs emphasized in textbooks change as grade levels progress. Frequency adverbs are introduced at the elementary school level; because they are explicitly specified in the Course of Study, their occurrences are relatively high at this stage. By contrast, modal, conjunctive, and evaluative adverbs occur only in very limited numbers in elementary school textbooks. Although some of these adverbs are presented in audio materials accessed via QR codes, they are generally not included in the written content of textbooks until junior high school.

Figure 1
Changes in Adverb Use in Each Grade (n = 2,371)



Note. Adapted from Takahashi (2025, Figure 23).

Conjunctive adverbs showed a marked increase in the second and third years of junior high school, which corresponds with the expansion of previously learned grammar and the increased use of expository texts. Even though a limited number of modal adverbs appear in the first year of junior high school, where students' grammatical knowledge is still relatively restricted, their usage increases more noticeably from the senior high school level onward. Evaluative adverbs are also found in junior high school textbooks; however, their frequency is lower than that of modal adverbs, and their use remains limited even in high school textbooks.

Overall, the results indicated that adverbs tend to be introduced in the following sequence: frequency adverbs, conjunctive adverbs, modal adverbs, and evaluative adverbs, though modal adverbs occasionally appear at earlier stages. This sequence is consistent with patterns observed in earlier generations of textbooks examined in this study.

Next, to determine whether the patterns observed in the 2023 textbooks are specific to the current editions or reflect a longer-term trend, adverb usage was compared with that in textbooks authorized in 1992 and 2005. Figure 2 compares the distribution of the adverb categories examined in this study across three generations of junior high school textbooks. Overall, the sequence in which adverb types are introduced remains broadly similar across the three generations, although differences can be observed in their

frequencies. Among the speaker-oriented adverbs, modal adverbs occur most frequently in the 1992 editions (29 occurrences). Across all three generations, conversation is the genre in which modal adverbs occur most frequently.

Figure 2
Adverbs in Three Junior High Generations (n = 1,089)

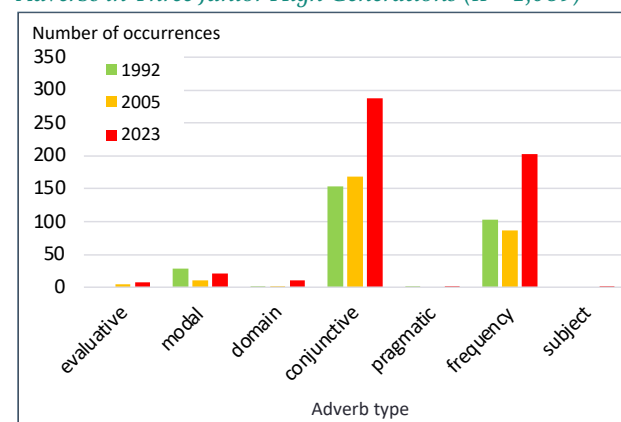
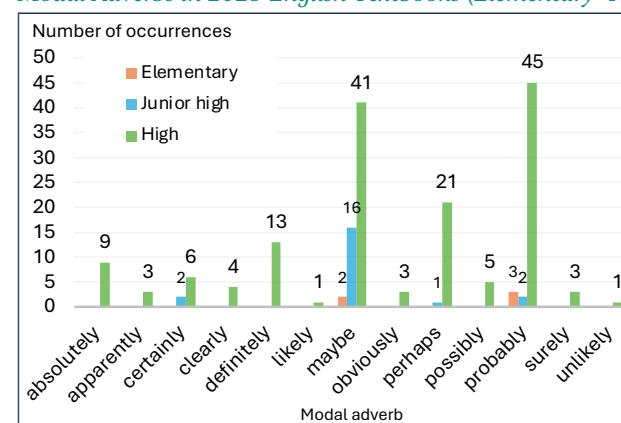


Figure 3
Modal Adverbs in 2023 English Textbooks (Elementary-High School) (n = 181)



Note. Adapted from Takahashi (2025, Figure 47).

After outlining the overall distribution of adverb types as shown in Figures 1 and 2, I focused specifically on modal adverbs and compared the individual items introduced at each school level as shown in Figure 3. Across all levels, “maybe” is the most frequent modal adverb, followed by “probably” and “perhaps.” In contrast, affirmative modal adverbs that allow speakers to express a strong positive stance, such as “definitely” and “absolutely,” are rarely introduced before senior high school and occur only rarely in junior high school textbooks.

A comparison between the 2023 textbooks and earlier editions revealed several notable tendencies. Although the timing of introduction and the selection of modal adverbs at the junior high school level vary across textbooks, they all share a strong reliance on “maybe.” With the exception of “maybe,” most modal adverbs appear only once, which may make it difficult for learners to acquire and retain them. Moreover, particularly at the junior high school level, affirmative modal adverbs expressing a high degree of speaker certainty are largely absent.

Taken together, these results suggested that the current treatment of modal adverbs in English textbooks in Japan may limit learners’ exposure to a wider range of stance expressions, particularly at the junior high school level. Notably, affirmative modal adverbs are underrepresented, as was further examined in the Discussion.

To compare the treatment of affirmative modal adverbs in English textbooks with their use in contemporary spoken English, the major affirmative modal adverbs (“absolutely,” “certainly,” “clearly,” “definitely,” and “surely”) were examined using the Spoken section of COCA. Because affirmative modal adverbs are primarily associated with spoken interaction, the comparison focused on conversational English. Table 1 presents their normalized frequencies per million words.

Table 1
Frequency of Major Affirmative Modal Adverbs in the Spoken Section of COCA (2015–2019)

Affirmative modal adverbs	Frequency (per million words)
absolutely	255.69
certainly	220.71
clearly	125.68
definitely	100.22
surely	6.45

As shown in Table 1, “absolutely” and “certainly” are the most frequent affirmative modal adverbs in the Spoken section of COCA, whereas “surely” occurs only rarely. Figures 4 and 5 further show that both “absolutely” and “definitely” have increased in frequency over time, with “definitely” showing a particularly consistent upward trend in recent years.

Figure 4
COCA Frequency of “Absolutely” by Year Range

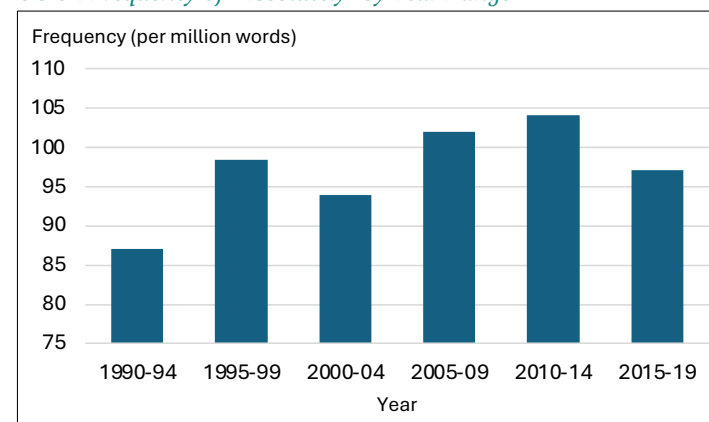
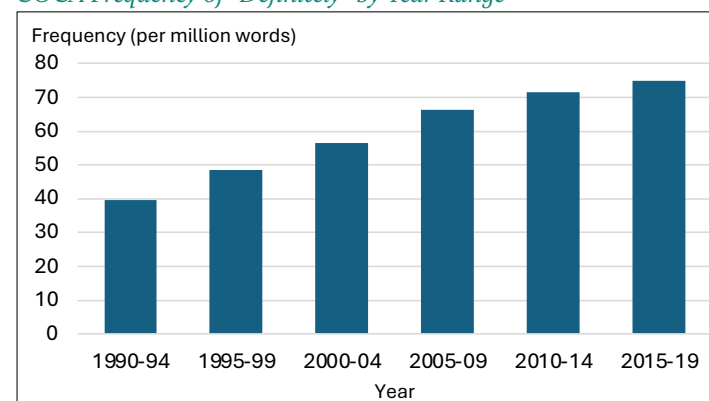


Figure 5
COCA Frequency of “Definitely” by Year Range



Discussion

As we have seen, both the frequency and the variety of modal adverbs increase as grade levels progress. However, when modal adverbs are introduced at the junior high school level, their use is heavily biased toward “maybe” across textbooks. In particular, affirmative modal adverbs are scarcely used in junior high school textbooks.

Furthermore, among the three generations of junior high school textbooks, the 1992 edition contained the largest number of modal adverbs (29 occurrences). An analysis of the genres in which modal adverbs occurred indicated that the 1992 textbooks included a greater proportion of conversational materials, where modal adverbs frequently occurred. In contrast, modal adverbs in the 2023 textbooks occurred more often in expository texts and learning activities. These findings suggest that changes in textbook composition may have influenced the frequency and distribution of modal adverbs across textbook generations. However, because the analysis was conducted across all textbook sections, this interpretation should be regarded as a possible explanation rather than evidence of a causal relationship. If the aim is to foster students’ communicative competence, it may therefore be worth paying greater attention not only to expository texts, essays, and debates but also to expressions characteristic of spoken interaction. In order to enable learners to express their stance more richly, it may also be beneficial for them to learn mitigating modal adverbs as well as affirmative modal adverbs that express a high degree of certainty, thereby expanding their expressive repertoire.

The COCA results provide information about how frequently affirmative modal adverbs occur in contemporary spoken English. However, frequency alone does not explain which adverbs are most useful for language learners. To consider their pedagogical value, it is also necessary to examine their semantic and pragmatic characteristics. Konishi (1989) distinguishes these adverbs according to their semantic and pragmatic properties. According to his explanation, “absolutely” and “definitely” express particularly strong subjective affirmation, whereas “certainly” and “surely” tend to express relatively weaker or more objective certainty. Therefore, from a pedagogical perspective, “definitely” and “absolutely” deserve particular attention because they enable learners to express strong personal attitudes and emotions in conversation.

Focusing on “definitely” and “absolutely,” COCA data indicate that both adverbs have increased in frequency from 1990 to 2019, with “definitely” showing a more consistent upward trend in recent years. Whereas “definitely” appears frequently in blogs and is also common in TV programs, movies, and spoken English, “absolutely” is used overwhelmingly in conversational contexts.

In the senior high school textbooks used in 2023 for first- and second-year students, “definitely” is used more frequently than “absolutely.” To compare these findings with earlier materials, I examined the 2002 and 2003 textbooks from the English I and II courses as well as the 2023 textbooks for the English Communication I and II courses, all of which are designed to develop overall English proficiency across the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the textbooks for English I and II, only “absolutely” is used. In contrast, the more recent textbooks show an increased use of “definitely,” which appears to reflect changes in actual language use.

To summarize the treatment of “definitely” and “absolutely” in junior and senior high school textbooks, neither adverb appears in any of the three generations of junior high school textbooks. “Definitely” is found only in the 2023 high school textbooks and appears most frequently in Tokyo Shoseki’s (2023) second-year textbook (*EL II*), where it is used primarily in the Useful Phrases sections and audio scripts. “Absolutely” appears in the second- and third-year high school textbooks and is often used as a single-word response in conversation. In older textbooks, it appeared only within a movie script. In the Tokyo Shoseki (2023) *EL II*, “definitely” is explicitly introduced in the Useful Phrases section of the *EL II* as shown in examples (1) and (2). These findings also suggest that learners may benefit from more opportunities to encounter affirmative modal adverbs in context and to understand the situations in which they are appropriately used.

(1) Useful Phrases

Recommending something

- You should definitely check it out.
- Definitely worth checking out. (*EL II*, p. 11, 2023)

(2) Useful Phrases

Accepting an invitation

- That sounds fun! I’ll be there!
- Count me in!
- I’ll definitely consider it. (*EL II*, p. 85, 2023)

Examples (3) and (4) are taken from *English Firsthand* 1 and 2 (Helgesen et al., 2018a, 2018b), introductory-level conversation textbooks for university students published

overseas. The dialogues are excerpts from *English in Action*, a video series designed to accompany the textbooks. Example (3) contains “definitely,” while example (4) includes “absolutely.” Italicized expressions indicate emphasis added by the author.

(3) Example of “definitely” from *English Firsthand 1* (Helgesen et al, 2018a)

Zelda: So what is the goal?

Yumi: In my wildest dreams ...

Zelda: Come on, tell me.

Yumi: In my wildest dreams, I'd be living in Paris, the capital of fashion, with my own studio, and my own clothing line.

Zelda: You could *definitely* do that.

Yumi: And you could *definitely* travel around the world if you wanted to.

(4) Example of “absolutely” from *English Firsthand 2* (Helgesen et al, 2018b)

Brad: Well, Yumi. You've been with Daisy Design Studio for now, what, three months?

Yumi: Yeah, it's been almost three months.

Brad: Well, it's been a very exciting ride, huh?

Zelda: Exciting? I'd say more like *absolutely* crazy!

Yumi: Yes, it's been exciting and crazy.

In example (3), the use of “definitely” in “You could definitely do that” and “You could definitely travel around the world if you wanted to” strongly affirms the possibility of achieving one's dreams and has an encouraging effect. The use of “absolutely” in “Exciting? I'd say more like absolutely crazy,” from example (4) intensifies the speaker's sentiment that the work was extremely demanding or overwhelming. As these examples illustrate, affirmative modal adverbs can express strong positive feelings in authentic conversational contexts.

Providing opportunities for junior high school students to encounter such uses of affirmative modal adverbs in conversation may therefore be useful for expanding their expressive range. Moreover, these adverbs can be used as single-word responses to questions. Even learners with limited grammatical knowledge, such as first-year junior

high school students or even elementary school students, may be able to use these adverbs to express their opinions more vividly and confidently. Introducing affirmative modal adverbs more systematically throughout primary and secondary English education, together with repeated opportunities to encounter and use them in a spiral progression, may help learners express their thoughts and attitudes more effectively.

Conclusion

This study examined the distribution and treatment of modal adverbs in English textbooks used in Japan from elementary through high school, with particular attention to affirmative modal adverbs. The findings indicate that although modal adverbs are introduced at the junior high school level, their usage shows a strong tendency toward “maybe,” and affirmative modal adverbs are rarely used in junior high school textbooks. Moreover, an analysis of the genres in which modal adverbs occurred suggests that, in recent textbooks, modal adverbs are found more often in expository texts and learning activities, whereas in earlier editions they are found more often in conversational materials. This reduction in conversational materials may be related to the reduced use of expressions characteristic of spoken interaction, including modal adverbs.

Affirmative modal adverbs allow speakers to express strong positive stances concisely. Because they do not require complex grammatical structures and can often be used as single-word responses, even learners with limited grammatical knowledge, such as first-year junior high school students or elementary school students, may be able to express their opinions more vividly by using forms such as “definitely.” Exposure to these adverbs in elementary and junior-high-school English education may help learners develop richer means of expressing their feelings and stances. In addition, for learners at higher grade levels, familiarity with such expressions may provide a way to communicate ideas more easily, even for students who feel less confident about grammar; it may also encourage greater interest in English. From this perspective, it may be worthwhile to consider more systematic instruction of affirmative modal adverbs across elementary, junior high, and senior high school English education.

There are a number of limitations in this study. For one, the modal adverbs were analyzed across all textbook sections rather than conversational sections alone. Future research should therefore examine conversational and non-conversational sections separately to investigate more directly how changes in textbook composition relate to the frequency and distribution of modal adverbs. Another limitation is that all coding was conducted by a single researcher. Although consistent coding criteria were applied

and all coding decisions were carefully reviewed, future research could strengthen the reliability of the findings by involving multiple coders and assessing inter-coder agreement.

This study provides an overview of the use of affirmative modal adverbs in English textbooks used in Japan and suggests the importance of introducing them systematically. It is hoped that insights from corpus research will contribute to the development of English language education that enables learners to express their ideas and attitudes more confidently and effectively.

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Bio Data

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