

An analysis of English textbooks used in Japanese junior and senior high schools: With reference to questions on written passages

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Abstract

According to the Ministry of Education, 21st century society is an “information-based society,” in which advanced knowledge, information, and technology are of primary importance (Ministry of Education, 2009a: 2). In such a society, media such as websites, television, newspapers, books, and mobile content are omnipresent. With so much information available, it becomes crucial for us as individuals to carefully select the relevant information and use it.

The ability to deal with information is defined as a *key competency*, essential for students in order to lead a successful life. *Key competencies* form the basis of the PISA tests, which estimate students’ abilities in three areas: reading, mathematics, and science (Ministry of Education). In the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests conducted in 2009, students from 65 countries were evaluated as to their literacy in those areas. In the 2009 PISA tests, Japan ranked 8th in reading ability, out of the 65 countries. Japanese students’ reading ability had improved compared to Japan’s PISA results from 2003 and 2006. However, when investigating Japanese students’ reading ability in detail, we find they still have a weakness in interpreting and evaluating texts (Ministry of Education, 2009b: 6-8). Therefore, students need to be trained in those specific subsets of reading.

Interpreting and evaluating texts is important not only in Japanese language teaching, but also in English language teaching (ELT). According to the revised high school curriculum, the skills of “logical thinking” and “critical thinking” are to be fostered through the courses “English Expression I ” and “English Expression II ”(Ministry of Education, 2009a: 4). Considering present conditions, those skills would benefit students’ future careers.

However, it is not clear how useful the current English textbooks are for promoting students’ logical and critical thinking. Given that textbooks are one of the essential tools for students’ language learning (Fukazawa, 2008: 169-170), one effective approach to this issue is to focus in textbooks on questions regarding written passages, as stated in Wakaari (2011: 24). Thus, in this study, I will classify and analyze questions in 15 selected English textbooks used in junior and senior high schools.

Taking into account the above-mentioned need, the researcher has two research questions set as follows:

(1) Does the ratio of *inferential* and *evaluative* questions increase with the students' grade in a selection of English textbooks currently used in junior and senior high schools?

(2) What levels of thinking and mental operations are required for *inferential* and *evaluative* questions on written passages?

I have classified the questions into the three categories, based on Tanaka, Shimada, and Kondo (2011): *Fact-finding questions* are for understanding facts directly written in passages; *inferential questions* are for guessing facts not directly written, based on information in passages; and *evaluative questions* are for eliciting readers' opinions or attitudes (Tanaka, Shimada, and Kondo, 2011: 12-13).

Tanaka takes up an example from Been (1975), to show the usage of those three question types: *Mary flies to the Occident twice a year to buy fashionable clothes*. There are three questions to this example:

(1) Fact-finding question: *Where does Mary go twice a year?*

(2) Inferential question: *Does Mary have a lot of money?*

(3) Evaluative question: *Imagine you have a lot of money. Would you spend it on clothes and pleasure?* (Tanaka et al, 2011: 12-13)

According to Tanaka et al, in order to respond to the fact-finding question, readers have only to retrieve necessary information from the texts. In this instance, the answer is *the Occident*. Then, the readers do not have to understand where *the Occident* is. By contrast, to respond to the inferential question, readers have to infer from the sentence that Mary is probably wealthy. Then the readers explore evidence from the sentence for inferring (Tanaka et al, 2011: 12-13). The example sentence says, *Mary flies to ... and to buy fashionable clothes*. Those phrases imply that Mary spends a lot of money for traveling and buying new clothes. To the evaluative question, the readers answer *Yes* or *No*, based on their understanding. It is important for the readers to express their own opinions.

In conclusion, this study reveals that over 90% of the activity items in reading and comprehension of texts, employed in selected current "Communication English I" and "English Expression I" textbooks, are *fact-finding questions*. In contrast, less than 10% of the activity items in those textbooks are *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions*. This is one of the factors that prevent learners from strengthening their skills of interpreting and evaluating texts. It is hoped that more numerous numbers and kinds of *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions* in the area of reading are applied to English textbooks, in order to foster the ability of

thinking deeply and creatively.

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