

A Study on Materials Use: What Type of Teaching Materials are Used in Senior High School English Classes in Japan?

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1 Introduction

In recent years, some drastic policy changes have taken place in English language teaching (ELT) in Japan, as seen in the adoption of an educational strategy called ‘*Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities”*’ and the introduction of ‘Foreign language activities’ into elementary schools. Such policy changes affect textbooks used in Japanese schools, because the School Education Law stipulates that the use of textbooks is compulsory and that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (Ministry of Education) examines them as to whether or not they are following its guidelines on textbooks (Ministry of Education, 1994).

Given the impact of teaching materials on learners’ learning of language (McGrath, 2002), such changes manifested in authorized textbooks are expected to bring about improvements on Japanese students’ learning of English. In reality, however, it is not certain whether dramatic improvements will take place as expected, since not much is known as to how much these authorized textbooks are being used in actual classes of English in Japan. In fact, there are even cases where teachers are teaching Grammar instead of Oral English in classes designated as Oral Communication I or II (Niizato, 2008). Under these circumstances, it is difficult for students to improve their oral communication skills as designed no matter how much textbooks for Oral Communication are improved. It is generally assumed that the main reason for such situations to exist is because the primary need of Japanese senior high school students who want to go on to college is to pass their entrance examinations and that most English tests for college admission are still focused on grammatical knowledge (Matsunaga, 2007; Watkins, Kawakami, & Kobayashi, 1997). Such being the case, textbook users, namely teachers and students, tend to view textbooks designed for Oral Communication I and II as not so useful for obtaining high scores on those tests. To make things worse, this issue is seldom discussed in public, since such schools may be censured by the Ministry of Education or the board of education in their district if it is known to them, as exemplified by a case which was discovered some years ago much to the dismay of the authorities concerned, where some senior high schools had ‘secretly’ graduated some of their students without finishing the mandatory subject ‘World History’.

To remedy such situations, it is considered essential to understand what teaching materials are used in actual classes, as mentioned by researchers such as Cunningsworth (1995) and Ellis (1997). Thus, as part of the study which investigates into the roles and problems of English textbooks in Japan, the researcher will take up the issue of materials use in English classes at senior high schools.

2 Literature review

Generally speaking, the issue of materials use does not seem to be the main concern in the field of foreign language education, especially at the secondary school level. The issue is mainly discussed in the context of basal materials for Reading at elementary schools (e.g., Barr & Sadow, 1989; Baumann & Heubach, 1996; Durkin, 1984). This, however, does not necessarily mean there are no studies on the issue in ELT. Studies may have been conducted on this issue, yet since many of them may have been done in an informal style, and thus have not been formally published in academic journals (McGrath, 2002).

In the Japanese literature, studies concerned with this issue are limited to those such as Ichikawa (2006), Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008), Kumabe (1981), and Japan Textbook Research Center (2008), which will be reviewed here. As part of their study which aimed at examining the effect of language learning on learners' cross-cultural attitudes in an effort to identify factors which affect them, Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008) investigated, by means of a questionnaire, on 47 English teachers at both junior and senior high schools in the Akita area as to whether they used authorized textbooks, and how much they used the textbooks. The results showed that over 90% of the teachers used authorized textbooks in their classes, and that, of these teachers, about 95%, which constituted about 85% of the total number of teachers in this area, used them for 60% or more of their class time. From this they concluded that their classes were 'textbook-oriented' focusing on 'formal "mechanical" teaching', while they provided 'little opportunity for free or creative activities' (p.145).

Given that the study's main focus was on looking at their students' cross-cultural attitudes fostered by language learning, it is unavoidable that the study could not provide information as to what materials other than textbooks are used in their classes. However, it can be positively stated that the researchers showed empirical data pertaining to the fact that teaching English in Japan is being strongly influenced by authorized textbooks.

Similarly, as part of the study which investigated into teachers' views and parents' expectations on textbooks, Japan Textbook Research Center (2008) asked, by means of a questionnaire, teachers at elementary and junior high schools about how they used their textbooks in their classes. In the

subject area of English, 326 junior high school teachers responded to the questionnaire, the results of which showed that nearly 80% answered that they used their textbooks exclusively or used them as their main teaching materials, while nearly 20% used both textbooks and other materials equally. Those who did not use textbooks as the main instructional tool or did not use textbooks at all were less than 1%.

The research did not take up the situation in senior high schools. On the other hand, it affirmed the position that textbooks hold in the Japanese educational system, judging from the fact that textbooks are used as the main teaching materials for many other subjects such as Japanese, Social studies, Mathematics, and Sciences at both elementary and lower secondary schools in Japan (Japan Textbook Research Center, 2008).

Another study conducted by Ichikawa (2006) investigated whether the classes of 'Oral Communication' were effective by asking 273 university students to answer his questionnaire on their experiences in these classes at their respective senior high schools. Of the question items on his questionnaire, one item was concerned with what materials were used other than their main textbooks, to which the results showed that the participants used the following materials listed in the order of frequency: (1) teacher-produced materials, (2) cassette tapes and CDs, (3) workbooks, (4) movies, (5) textbooks published in foreign countries, and (6) VTR. He then asked to what extent those extra materials were covered, to which half of the participants said all or almost all of them were covered, while nearly 30% answered half of them were covered, and 23% answered they were seldom covered. Also, concerning the question on to what extent audio materials (i.e., cassette tapes and CDs) were used in their classes, almost 40% answered they were used at every class hour, while nearly one third said 'sometimes', and nearly a quarter chose 'seldom'.

Although he did not directly ask to what extent the textbooks were used in Oral Communication classes, his research showed that other teaching materials were also used with certain frequency. Especially, it is to be positively evaluated that the study revealed that teacher-produced materials and audio materials were used to a certain extent, which suggests that teachers are not totally dependent on textbooks and that they recognize the importance of developing students' oral communication skills.

As part of a survey dealing with the issue of class division based on the degrees of academic achievement (i.e., 'streaming'), Kumabe (1981) asked 160 senior high schools, by means of a questionnaire, whether they used different textbooks for different levels of classes. The results revealed that almost all the schools used the same textbooks for all the classes regardless, while only 4% of the schools used different textbooks.

Of the schools which answered that they used the same textbooks, about half answered that they

made changes in the content of teaching by using supplementary materials such as side readers, books of drills, or teacher-produced materials. In regard to those schools which answered that they used different textbooks, half of them made changes in the content of teaching by using English A textbooks for one level of classes and English B textbooks for another level, while the other half of the schools differentiated it by using teacher-produced materials.

The studies reviewed here show that textbooks are used as the main teaching materials at almost all junior and senior high schools in Japan (Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki, 2008; Japan Textbook Research Center, 2008), while other teaching materials are also used (Ichikawa, 2006; Kumabe, 1981). However, as seen above, the issue on what materials are used in actual classrooms is mostly taken up only as part of a study which is mainly focused on different issues. It can be said that, given the central position textbooks hold in the ELT of Japan, the issue of materials use does not get the level of attention it deserves.

In addition, the studies discussed so far did not take up the two questions—namely, the use of the main textbooks and the use of other supplementary materials—at the same time, nor did they clearly show which English classes used what type of teaching materials. To answer all of these questions is necessary to gain a deeper insight into the issue under discussion.

3 Research design

The preceding chapter has unfolded a need for further research on what teaching materials are actually being used in the Japanese school context. With this need taken into account, the researcher set two research questions as follows: (1) To what extent the participants from Akita University used their textbooks in their respective English classes (i.e., English I, English II, Oral Communication I, Oral Communication II, Reading, and Writing) when they were in Japanese senior high school? (2) What materials (i.e., workbooks, grammar books, audio materials, audio-visual materials, teacher-produced materials) did they use in addition to their textbooks?

3.1 Participants

To answer the research questions, a questionnaire was conducted with the users of textbooks, namely the students. The participants in this research are some of the Japanese students at Akita University, and the number of students involved was 291 in all. Of the 291 students, 261 were from a class entitled 'English for Academic Purposes', which is a compulsory subject in the university's curriculum for all its first year students. In addition to those taking the English for Academic Purposes class, 16 of the participants were from a course designed for future teachers of English called English Language Teaching Practice, and another 14 students were from a course in

Applied Linguistics II. Almost all of the participants were assumed to be in the age bracket between 18 and 20.

The participants are majoring in either education, engineering, or medical sciences. As for their home prefectures, 153 (52.6%) are from Akita Prefecture, while 65 (22.3%) are from other Tohoku (northern Japan area) prefectures and 73 from the rest of Japan.

Though there are no exact data, most of these participants are assumed to have taken the regular entrance examinations to this university, since seats for those who enter the university in other ways (e.g., through recommendations by their high school principals) are limited in number. Naturally, as shown in Table 1 below, most of the participants had taken most of the classes of English. The only exception, Oral Communication II, which only 50 participants had taken, was the class taken by fewer than 55,000 at all the senior high schools in Japan in the academic year 2005. Given that this figure is less than one-tenth of all the eligible students (Watanabe, 2005), the results are considered to roughly correspond to the results of Watanabe (2005).

In addition, there were two students who had taken classes other than the above-mentioned six (i.e., Basic English Conversation, Current English, and Language Laboratory Seminar), but the data in these exceptional cases were not analyzed as they were very small in number.

Table 1 *Classes of English and number of students who have taken them*

Class	English I	English II	OC ^a I	OC II	Reading	Writing
Taken	255	233	233	50	198	238
Not taken	11	29	33	208	65	30
Others	25	29	25	33	28	33

Note. N=291. 'Others' include those who chose 'Don't remember' or did not answer the question.

3.2 Instrumentation

Of the questions on the questionnaire used in this part of research, the first three (i.e., Questions 1-3) are concerned with the background information of the participants (i.e., where they studied during their senior high school days, what classes of English they took in senior high school, and what textbooks they used there). The other questions are concerned with (1) to what extent they used their textbooks in class (Question 4); (2) what materials they used in addition to their textbooks (Question 5). These questions were developed on the basis of the questionnaires used in Ichikawa (2006), Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008), and Japan Textbook Research Center (2008).

3.3 Procedures for giving the questionnaire and data analysis

First, to ensure its construct validity, a tentative questionnaire was piloted: a questionnaire was tried on several students. Following the pilot questionnaire, this study revised the questions on the questionnaire on the basis of the feedback given by the initial participants. Then, data collection was started by giving the formal questionnaire to all the participants. This was implemented in two different periods to ensure a sufficient number of participants: one in late July, just before classes in the first semester ended, and the other in late December, just before classes in the second semester went into the winter vacation. Each time the questionnaire was implemented during their class hour with permission and help from their attendant teacher.

The data analysis was started as soon as the first batch of data was collected. This is said to give researchers an opportunity to improve the research design and data collection from then on (Wellington, 2000).

Closed-ended questions on the questionnaire have been analyzed quantitatively, the results of which were presented by using the Excel software. The results thus obtained were then compared and contrasted against some other studies available (Radnor, 2001).

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Frequency of the use of textbooks

Table 2 shows that, generally speaking, textbooks were used often in classes, though not so frequently for the class in Oral Communication II. More than 65% of the students answered that they used textbooks for almost every class hour, which is correspondent to the results obtained by Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008) and Japan Textbook Research Center (2008). The results illustrate the centrality of textbooks used for teaching English at Japanese senior high schools, as pointed out by Wakabayashi and Imura (1980) and Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008).

However, the figures for the regular use of textbooks differ depending on the class. While around 85% of the students used textbooks for almost every class hour for English I and II, the figures for Oral Communication I, Reading and Writing were between 65% and 75%, and the figure for Oral Communication II was less than 60%. This may suggest that, for classes other than English I and II, some other activities which did not need the use of textbooks were conducted more often. This is probably because, unlike English I and II which are concerned with all aspects of the four language skills, such classes as Oral Communication I and II, Reading, and Writing generally focus on some particular aspects, which may make it easier for teachers to concentrate on some other activities extensively.

Table 2 *Frequency in the use of textbooks in English classes*

Class	English I	English II	OC ^a I	OC II	Reading	Writing
N	255	233	233	50	198	238
5 ^b (%)	141 (55.3%)	127 (54.5%)	97 (41.6%)	18 (36.0%)	87 (43.9%)	100 (42.0%)
4 ^c (%)	77 (30.2%)	68 (29.2%)	58 (24.9%)	11 (22.0%)	56 (28.3%)	73 (30.7%)
3 ^d (%)	1 (0.4%)	1 (0.4%)	12 (5.2%)	2 (4.0%)	5 (2.5%)	9 (3.8%)
2 ^e (%)	3 (1.2%)	5 (2.1%)	11 (4.7%)	5 (10.0%)	2 (1.0%)	3 (1.3%)
1 ^f (%)	3 (1.2%)	4 (1.7%)	11 (4.7%)	3 (6.0%)	7 (3.5%)	9 (3.8%)
Others (%)	30 (11.8%)	28 (12.0%)	44 (18.9%)	11(22.0%)	41 (20.7%)	44 (18.5%)
M (1-5)	4.55	4.51	4.16	4.00	4.36	4.30

Note. ‘M’ in the table is the average number of answers from 5 to 1. ^a‘OC’ stands for ‘Oral Communication’. ^b‘5’ stands for ‘(the textbooks are used) in every class’. ^c‘4’ stands for ‘in almost every class’. ^d‘3’ stands for ‘sometimes’. ^e‘2’ stands for ‘rarely’. ^f‘1’ stands for ‘not at all’. ‘Others’ include those who chose ‘Don’t remember’ or did not answer the question.

4.2 Use of teaching materials other than textbooks

According to Table 3, more than one-third of the students answered that workbooks and teacher-produced materials were also used in all the English classes, which is correspondent to the results obtained by Ichikawa’s study (2006) on the classes of Oral Communication. The fact that teacher-produced materials were used rather frequently may indicate that, although their teaching was based on the main textbooks, teachers were not totally dependent on them and made efforts to help their students understand the contents of their classes one way or another, as indicated by Baumann and Heubach (1996) and Japan Textbook Research Center (2008). It would be interesting to know how the teachers viewed the textbooks they used and what aspects those teacher-produced materials dealt with.

Audio materials were also used in most of the classes (except for Writing classes), notably in English I and II, in which more than half of the students said that they used such materials. Given that the results are correspondent to Ichikawa (2006), it may suggest that teachers began to recognize the importance of developing their students’ listening skills and tried to reflect it in their classes, probably because listening comprehension tests were newly included as part of the National Center Tests for University Admissions (i.e., standardized tests for all national university applicants) in 2006 (Matsunaga, 2007).

Table 3 *Use of teaching materials other than textbooks in English classes*

Class	English I	English II	OC ^a I	OC II	Reading	Writing
N	255	233	233	50	198	238
WB ^b (%)	99 (38.8%)	87 (37.3%)	90 (38.6%)	17 (34.0%)	70 (35.4%)	118 (49.6%)
GB ^c (%)	66 (25.9%)	62 (26.6%)	91 (39.1%)	20 (40.0%)	54 (27.3%)	113 (47.5%)
AM ^d (%)	135 (52.9%)	121 (51.9%)	72 (30.9%)	15 (30.0%)	86 (43.4%)	63 (26.5%)
AVM ^e (%)	10 (3.9%)	9 (3.9%)	9 (3.9%)	3 (6.0%)	5 (2.5%)	3 (1.3%)
TPM ^f (%)	121 (47.5%)	116 (49.8%)	79 (33.9%)	17 (34.0%)	94 (47.5%)	116 (48.7%)
OM ^g (%)	3 (1.2%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (0.9%)	2 (4.0%)	4 (2.0%)	2 (0.8%)
Others (%)	51 (20.0%)	48 (20.6%)	51 (21.9%)	9 (18.0%)	55 (27.8%)	43 (18.1%)

Note. The sum of the percentage points exceeds 100%, as multiple materials are used in the class.

^a‘OC’ stands for ‘Oral Communication’. ^b‘WB’ stands for ‘workbooks’. ^c‘GB’ stands for ‘grammar books’. ^d‘AM’ stands for ‘audio materials’. ^e‘AVM’ stands for ‘audio-visual materials’. ^f‘TPM’ stands for ‘teacher-produced materials’. ^g‘OM’ stands for ‘other materials’. ‘Others’ include those who chose ‘Don’t remember’ or did not answer the question.

On the other hand, it is surprising that such audio materials were used in Reading classes rather than in Oral Communication I and II classes, in spite of the fact that the latter group of classes were supposed to deal mainly with listening and speaking skills (Ministry of Education, 1999). This may indicate that in Oral Communication I and II classes, listening skills were not focused on as much as they should, as pointed out by Ichikawa (2006) and Niizato (2008). One might wonder why, but the reason is simple. Ironically enough, around 40% or more of the students used grammar books in classes for Oral Communication I, II, and Writing, which suggests that grammar lessons were given in these classes, while in English I, II, and Reading classes, less than 30% of the students were given such irregular lessons. Judging from these findings, it may be said that at schools where passing the entrance examinations was regarded as the most important goal, grammar, instead of listening and speaking skills, was taught in Oral Communication I, II, and Writing classes, whereas in English I, II, and Reading classes, listening skills were more of a concern to the teachers in addition to reading comprehension skills.

With regard to audio-visual materials, they were rarely used in any of their classes, which was a tendency also found by Ichikawa (2006). As for materials other than those mentioned above, questions from past entrance exams or wordbooks were used in some of the classes, but they were in the minority.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Summary

The investigation of this research so far has made it clear that English classes at senior high schools were primarily based on authorized textbooks, which indicates the strong influence that authorized textbooks exert on ELT in Japan, as pointed out by Wakabayashi and Imura (1980) and Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008). On the other hand, the investigation has also shown that teacher-produced materials were also being used to some extent. Given that textbooks usually came with various attendant materials, the results show that teachers were not totally dependent on textbooks and their accompanying materials alone, as discussed by Baumann and Heubach (1996).

This research has also revealed that grammar books are still being used to a certain degree in some classes (e.g., in classes for Oral Communication I, II, and Writing), which seems to indicate that grammar teaching is still being commonly practiced in many schools, obviously with entrance examinations in mind (Ichikawa, 2006; Niizato, 2008). Similarly, audio materials were being used rather extensively in English I, II, and Reading classes, which appears to suggest that teachers and students began to acknowledge the importance of listening comprehension skills. However, given that this tendency is probably due to the listening comprehension tests recently added to the National Center Tests for University Admissions, it should be said that ELT in Japan is still driven by entrance examinations.

5.2 Limitations of the study and future research

As with all research, this study suffers from some limitations. First of all, in Akita Prefecture, doing research at senior high schools would involve asking the permission of the prefecture's board of education, as referred to in Ingram, Kono, O'Neill, and Sasaki (2008). This makes it difficult for the researcher to directly ask the teachers and students at the senior high schools involved, as some of their answers to the questions may cause embarrassing problems for the teachers, schools, or those in the prefecture's board of education.

Alternatively the researcher asked the questions to university students, yet some did not remember precisely what materials were used and to what extent they were used in classes at their senior high schools. This may be especially true of the students who participated in the study in December, which may lower the trustworthiness of the results.

Moreover, the constraints due to the limited time and practicality also precluded the application of the location triangulation. Given that more than half of the participants are from Akita Prefecture (see 3.1), the results obtained from the research may not be able to explain the situation

in the whole country, but only the situation in a particular area. Also, the study dealt with only around 300 students, which is not sufficient to generalize the results.

These limitations suggest that there is a need for further research. First, as pointed out above, there is a need to involve senior high school students from across the whole country and increase the number of participants. Second, while this research has shown the type of teaching materials that were being used in English classes, it has not made clear exactly how much those extra teaching materials (other than textbooks) were actually used or how those teaching materials, including textbooks, were used in their classes. Thus, to further clarify these issues, it would be necessary to supplement this research by observing English classes and/or by conducting questionnaires or interviews with the teachers and students concerned. Furthermore, to gain a deeper insight into the roles and problems of textbooks used in Japan, it will be necessary to gather opinions not only from teachers and students at senior high schools, but also from those who are concerned with textbooks in different roles (e.g., schools, textbook writers, publishers, and policy makers).

In spite of the limitations enumerated above, since this type of study on teaching materials has scarcely been available in Japan, it is hoped that it will generate further interest in the use, evaluation, and development of teaching materials in the ELT of Japan.

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