

Comprehension-Check Activities in Senior High School English Textbooks

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1. Introduction

In the latest versions of the Course of Study for both junior and senior high schools, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology (henceforth, Ministry of Education, for short) emphasizes the importance of developing the so-called “language ability” in all the subjects taught in schools (Ministry of Education, 2008, 2009). This emphasis on the linguistic ability is partly attributable to the results of Japanese students’ performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests conducted in 2003, which indicated that Japanese students had a striking weakness in their reading ability, especially in the area for interpreting and evaluating texts (Ministry of Education, 2006).

To develop students’ skills for interpreting and evaluating texts, it is essential for them to have a deep understanding of texts, and for achieving this goal a number of approaches can be taken at various levels, as suggested by Arimoto (2010) and Shibata (2006). For instance, students may need to read several different newspaper articles on the same topic and make a comparison among the various articles, and teachers too may need to revise their instructions for students’ activities on text comprehension.

Above all, considering the impact of teaching materials on the learners’ learning of language (McGrath, 2002), one effective approach may be for authorized textbooks to adopt such comprehension-check activities as will deepen students’ understanding of texts. At the moment, however, it is not clearly known to what extent comprehension-check activities adopted in the current English textbooks are useful for promoting their understanding. Thus, this study takes up this issue and examines some actual textbooks from this viewpoint.

2. Literature review

Since the PISA tests only measure students’ reading ability in their first language (i.e., not in a foreign language), there is only a limited amount of studies on how to develop their skills for interpreting and evaluating texts in the field of ELT (e.g., Cots, 2006), as far as the author has explored. However, judging from the descriptions made on what the PISA tests assess, such as

(students') "ability to adapt the knowledge they acquire at school to real-life situations" and "knowledge and skills essential in everyday life" (OECD, n.d.), it can be said that the ability required in the PISA tests has certain relevance to real communication, and, in this sense, the field of ELT is considered to have accumulated a certain number of previous studies, particularly on the nature of communication. For instance, on the basis of a study examining a conversation between two people on a TV program, Saito (1996a) maintains that real communication involves not only exchanging facts which interlocutors already know (i.e., what he calls a "finding-facts" type), but also exchanging ideas, opinions and impressions on a particular topic (i.e., what he calls a "personal-involvement" type), and that in real communication the latter type tends to appear more frequently than the former. Similarly, McDonough and Shaw (2003) state that, according to the psychology of learning, the reading skill consists of various sub-skills such as skimming, scanning, predicting, and making inferences.

These findings are reflected in recent teaching materials developed on the basis of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). For example, each comprehension-check question adopted in *Reading Explorer 2* (2009, Heinle) goes so far as to present its question type by using such keywords as "Gist", "Detail" and "Inference".

However, while many teaching materials take into account such nature of communication in comprehension-check activities, English textbooks used in the Japanese school context do not seem to follow this tendency, as indicated by Seki (1993). For instance, a student's study referred to by Saito (2006a) analyzed comprehension-check questions in three English II textbooks used in senior high schools and found that most of the questions only expect the students to find mere facts, with more than 80% of the questions in all the textbooks being classified as the "finding-facts" category.

Similar results were shown in a research conducted by the author of this paper in 2005, which analyzed three English textbooks used in junior high schools on the basis of the framework proposed by Littlejohn (1998). Targeting several units, the study investigated to what extent they reflected some key elements of CLT and CLT-based teaching materials, including the types of mental operations which the activities in those textbooks expect students to engage in. In relation to comprehension-check activities, the study pointed out that selecting information, which is almost equivalent to what Saito (2006a) calls "finding facts", and decoding semantic/propositional meanings, which involves translating phrases or sentences into the mother tongue, were frequently employed in all the textbooks, but that the activities did not require inferences or interpretations from the students (Wakaari, 2005).

These studies seem to bring up an issue on the quality of comprehension-check activities in English textbooks used in the Japanese school context. On the other hand, these studies have some limitations, too. For example, a study referred to by Saito (2006a) only showed the percentage of two types of comprehension-check questions, without presenting the actual number of comprehension-check questions analyzed nor detailed explanations concerning what is classified as “Others”. Similarly, even the author’s study in 2005 only investigated some selected units of the textbooks, but not the whole textbooks. These limitations call for a need for a more thorough research on this issue.

3. Methods

3.1 Research questions

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

- (1) What percentage do activity items concerned with text comprehension comprise within the total number of activity items contained in senior high school English textbooks?
- (2) What type of mental operations do the activity items concerned with text comprehension ask students to engage in?

The first research question is concerned with measuring the importance of comprehension-check activity items assumed in senior high school English textbooks. The second research question examines the quality of comprehension-check activity items in the textbooks.

With regard to the term “activity item”, it refers to an item contained in one activity. For instance, the reading activity below has four questions for checking students’ comprehension of the text, and thus the number of activity items is counted as four.

Read the following passage written on endangered species and answer the questions below.

Giant pandas live in the mountains in China where there are bamboo forests. Giant pandas eat only bamboo. There are only about 1,000 pandas living in the wild today. Some scientists say they are dying out naturally. Other scientists believe giant pandas may soon become extinct because humans have been cutting down bamboo forests and hunting them for their fur. We need to understand that our actions influence the life of the pandas.

- ① What is the name of the endangered species?
 - ② How many of them are still alive?
 - ③ Why are they becoming extinct?
 - ④ What can we do to save them?
- (*Pro-Vision English Course I*, 2006:77)

This study investigates both reading and listening comprehension activity items, as comprehension-check activities are provided not only in written texts but also in spoken texts, as seen in the example activity below (the conversation transcribed in square brackets are not visibly presented in the textbook). In order to develop students' skills for interpreting and evaluating texts, it is important to revise comprehension-check activity items for listening.

4 Answer the question after listening to the conversation.

[*Mother* What do you have there, Peter?

Peter It's a prize, Mom. I got it at school.

Mother A prize? What for, dear?

Peter Our teacher asked the class how many legs an ostrich had and I said three.

Mother But an ostrich has two legs.

Peter I know that now, Mom, but the rest of the class said four; so I was nearest.]

How many legs did Peter say an ostrich has?

1) One. 2) Two. 3) Three. 4) Four.

(*Crown English Series I*, 2006:36)

3.2 Textbooks to be evaluated

In order to answer the research questions set above, an examination was carried out on some selected textbooks. For reasons of limited time and other practical considerations, it was not feasible to investigate all the textbooks adopted in senior high schools in Japan, since there were more than 100 textbooks. Therefore, this study took up only a few textbooks designed for 'English I', partly because it is being used by over 1.3 million students (Watanabe, 2005), which is the largest in the number of students who take English-related subjects. 'English I' is also considered as one of the base subjects for starting the study of English at the level of senior high schools in Japan.

There is, however, another issue that makes it impossible to investigate all the 'English I' textbooks, because more than 30 textbooks are published for this particular subject alone. Thus, it was necessary to limit the number of textbooks to be examined and this study has eventually focused on the following four textbooks: *Crown English Series I New Edition* (2006, Sanseido); *Prominence English I* (2006, Tokyo Shoseki); *Pro-Vision English Course I New Edition* (2006, Kirihara Shoten); and *Voyager English Course I New Edition* (2006, Daiichi Gakushusha). These textbooks were published by companies which, according to Watanabe (2005), kept the largest share in the number of adoptions for 'English I'. In addition, the four selected textbooks are all considered to target senior high school students at the advanced levels of English, which makes it possible to conduct a comparative analysis among them.

3.3 Criterion for evaluation

To answer the research questions, two criteria are set for evaluation: the main role of activity items and the types of mental operations required in text-comprehension activity items. The criterion for the main role of activity items is concerned with the central roles that activity items are assigned to function in the learning of language. In order to evaluate activity items by this criterion, this study has established seven subsets or categories on the basis of Ishida (1993) and Okita (1993): (1) Comprehending the texts; (2) Developing the knowledge of grammar; (3) Developing the knowledge of vocabulary; (4) Developing the knowledge of pronunciation; (5) Using language for communication; (6) Developing listening strategies; and (7) Developing reading strategies.

As for the criterion of mental operations required in text-comprehension activity items, it is evaluated according to what types of mental operations are involved in the activity items. For this criterion, the following 10 subsets have been developed: (1) Retrieving from short term memory; (2) Retrieving from intermediate term memory; (3) Retrieving from long term memory; (4) Finding facts; (5) Making inferences; (6) Applying general knowledge; (7) Extrapolating from learners' experiences; (8) Forming learners' opinions; (9) Describing; and (10) Decoding of the texts. Most of these subsets, or categories, have been adopted from Littlejohn (1998), Nuttal (1982), and Saito (1996b), and their definitions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Definitions of mental operations

| No. | Category | Definition |
|------|---|--|
| (1) | Retrieving from short term memory: | The learner is to recall items of language from short term memory—that is, within a matter of seconds |
| (2) | Retrieving from intermediate term memory: | The learner is to recall items from intermediate term memory—that is, within a matter of minutes. Here it applies to the time up to the entire length of the class hour (approximately 50 minutes) |
| (3) | Retrieving from long term memory: | The learner is to recall items from the previous lesson |
| (4) | Finding facts: | The learner is to find facts written in the text |
| (5) | Making inferences: | The learner is to make inferences from the text |
| (6) | Applying general knowledge: | The learner is to draw on their knowledge of 'general facts' about the world |
| (7) | Extrapolating from learners' experiences: | The learner is to draw on their knowledge gained from their experiences |
| (8) | Forming learners' opinions: | The learner is to form their own opinions |
| (9) | Describing: | The learner is to describe things written in the text |
| (10) | Decoding of the texts: | The learner is to decode the 'surface' meaning of the text |

Note. In this study the term 'short term memory', which is considered to store information for up to 15 to 30 seconds, follows the definition adopted in the *Dictionary of Applied Psychology* (2007), while the term 'intermediate term memory' developed on the basis of Littlejohn (1998) belongs to the time within the bounds of the long term memory defined in most literature (e.g., *Dictionary of Applied Psychology*, 2007; *Dictionary of Psychology*, 2004), which can store information almost forever. The term 'intermediate term memory' has been developed specifically to distinguish between the practice time in class and the time beyond that length.

4 Results and discussions

Table 2 shows the numbers of activity items contained in the four selected textbooks. As shown in the table, a total of 2,305 activity items were analyzed in this study.

Table 2 Number of activity items analyzed

| Textbook | A | B | C | D | Total |
|----------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| Activity items | 635 | 728 | 396 | 546 | 2,305 |

4.1 Main role of activity items

Table 3 shows what role the activity items mainly have, as well as their number and ratio against the total number of activity items contained in the textbooks. According to the table, all of the textbooks have activity items concerned with the comprehension of texts for around 40 to 50 percent, which is the largest proportion within the seven types of activity items set in this study. This indicates that the textbooks are primarily based on texts in the main units, as pointed out by Kanatani (1992).

Table 3 Main role of the activity items

| Textbook | A | B | C | D | Total |
|--------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| N | 635 | 728 | 396 | 546 | 2,305 |
| Comprehension of texts (%) | 263(41.4%) | 365(50.1%) | 172(43.4%) | 230(42.1%) | 1,030(44.7%) |
| Knowledge of grammar (%) | 159(25.0%) | 178(24.5%) | 155(39.1%) | 227(41.6%) | 719(31.2%) |
| Knowledge of vocabulary (%) | 40(6.3%) | 17(2.3%) | 0(0.0%) | 0(0.0%) | 57(2.5%) |
| Knowledge of pronunciation (%) | 85(13.4%) | 48(6.6%) | 16(4.0%) | 29(5.3%) | 178(7.7%) |
| Communication (%) | 88(13.8%) | 85(11.7%) | 53(13.4%) | 34(6.2%) | 260(11.3%) |
| Listening strategies (%) | 0(0.0%) | 28(11.7%) | 0(0.0%) | 0(0.0%) | 28(1.2%) |
| Reading strategies (%) | 0(0.0%) | 7(6.6%) | 0(0.0%) | 26(4.8%) | 33(1.4%) |

This text-centeredness in textbooks in general seems to have existed for a long time in the history of the ELT of Japan, as textbooks used in the past had similar styles (e.g., *The Readers of the School and Family Series*, 1860; *Barne's New National Readers*, 1883). It was mainly because the purpose of learning English in Japan in those days was to obtain knowledge from the West, rather than communicating with people there (Imura, 2003). Under such circumstances, it was not surprising if teachers and students were entirely devoted to developing the reading skill, which was acquired by reading the texts with the help of grammar rules involved. It is also understandable that entrance examinations in those days focused exclusively on the students' reading skills and their knowledge of grammar, as stated in Imura (2003). However, this tendency may be no longer acceptable in this age of globalized communication and commerce, where the other three skills are considered to be of equal, or even more, importance.

4.2 Mental operations required in text-comprehension activity items

Table 4 shows what the activity items concerned with text comprehension require students to do in terms of mental operations, as well as their number and ratio against the total number of the activity items. According to the table, on average, the activity items involving the mental operations of decoding of texts and finding facts make up nearly 70% of the activity items under analysis. An example text and activity items involving these mental operations are shown below.

Hello. I'm Severn Suzuki speaking for ECO, the Environmental Children's Organization. We're a group of twelve- and thirteen-year-olds from Canada trying to make a difference. Coming up here today, I have no hidden agenda. I am fighting for my future.

I'm here to speak for all generations to come. I am here to speak for the hungry children around the world. I am here to speak for the animals dying across the planet.

Q1 What does ECO stand for?

Q2 Who is Severn Suzuki speaking for?

(*Prominence English I*, 2006:18-19)

Table 4 Mental operations required in text-comprehension activity items

| Textbook | A | B | C | D | Total |
|---|------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| N | 263 | 365 | 172 | 230 | 1,030 |
| Retrieve from short term memory (%) | 0(0.0%) | 2(0.5%) | 0(0.0%) | 0(0.0%) | 2(0.2%) |
| Retrieve from inter. term memory (%) | 60(22.8%) | 57(15.6%) | 20(11.6%) | 40(17.4%) | 177(17.2%) |
| Retrieve from long term memory (%) | 59(22.4%) | 167(45.8%) | 40(23.3%) | 63(27.4%) | 329(31.9%) |
| Find facts (%) | 166(63.1%) | 255(69.9%) | 130(75.6%) | 165(71.7%) | 716(69.5%) |
| Make inference (%) | 9(3.4%) | 1(0.3%) | 4(2.3%) | 5(2.2%) | 19(1.8%) |
| Apply general knowledge (%) | 2(0.8%) | 37(10.1%) | 2(1.2%) | 10(4.3%) | 51(5.0%) |
| Extrapolate from personal experiences (%) | 9(3.4%) | 19(5.2%) | 11(6.4%) | 1(0.4%) | 40(3.9%) |
| Form personal opinions (%) | 17(6.5%) | 15(4.1%) | 3(1.7%) | 8(3.5%) | 43(4.2%) |
| Describe (%) | 0(0.0%) | 0(0.0%) | 2(1.2%) | 1(0.4%) | 3(0.3%) |
| Decode texts (%) | 175(66.5%) | 267(73.2%) | 133(77.3%) | 170(73.9%) | 745(72.3%) |

Note. The sum of the percentage points in each textbook exceeds 100%, as some activity items involve more than one mental operation (e.g., find facts and decode texts).

This is followed by retrieving information from long term memory, which has nearly one third. Especially, in Textbook B, retrieving information from long term memory is used in nearly half of the activity items, which is because there is a number of comprehension-check activity items at the post-reading stage in the textbook, as shown below.

B Put 'T' if the statement follows the main text and put 'F' if it does not.

1. Severn Suzuki came from Canada to speak to the delegates from all over the world.
2. Severn Suzuki said she was afraid to breathe the air because of the holes in the ozone.
3. Severn Suzuki said she believed that her children would be able to see wild birds or animals in jungles and rainforests.
4. Severn Suzuki said we should stop breaking things if we don't know how to fix them.
5. Severn Suzuki said people all over the world should work together toward the same goal.
6. Severn Suzuki said actions and words were two different things.

C Summarize the speech by Severn Suzuki by filling in the blanks and completing the table.

| | <u>Examples taken up in the text</u> | <u>Arguments by Severn</u> |
|---|--|----------------------------|
| <u>Environmental problems for which the solutions have not been found</u> | 1. | 5. |
| | 2. | |
| | 3. <u>Bring back an animal now extinct</u> | |
| | 4. | |
| <u>Things which children are taught at school</u> | 6. | 11. |
| | 7. | |
| | 8. | |
| | 9. <u>Not to hurt other creatures</u> | |
| | 10. | |

(An excerpt from Textbook B)

The activity items involving the retrieval of information from intermediate term memory come after the three mental operations (i.e., decoding of the texts, finding facts, and retrieving from long term memory), the average figure for which is 17.2%. Given that all of the activity items in this category involve listening, it can be said that listening activity items have a certain proportion in the activity items for comprehending texts, which suggests a need to examine them in more detail in future research.

On the other hand, there are only a limited number of activity items involving mental operations such as making inferences, applying general knowledge, extrapolating from personal experiences, forming personal opinions, and describing, as indicated by Seki (1993). This means that most of the activity items concerned with text comprehension can be dealt with by mainly extracting key information from the text, which does not require students to make a guess or use their own schema. These findings have so much in common with those from the analysis of junior high school textbooks (i.e., Wakaari, 2005) and those of a study on English II textbooks referred to by Saito (2006a).

In reference to these tendencies in the textbooks adopted in Japan, there are some explanations often made. One major explanation is to put the blame on the influence of college entrance examinations, which do not give the examinees any chance to make a guess or use their own schema, obviously because of the difficulty in evaluating their interpretations by numerical figures. Another explanation is the fear of thus going against the important criterion of ensuring fairness in testing. Naturally, textbook developers too are not encouraged to run the risk of adopting activity items involving these mental operations.

Still another explanation is to refer to the traditional teaching/learning techniques long used in Japan (e.g., repetition and memorization), as pointed out by Atkinson (1997), Carson (1992), Imura (2003), and Rao (2002). In fact, students have been dependent on these techniques for a long time during the process of their school education. Thus, it is not surprising that the

students feel uncomfortable making a guess (Nelson, 1995; Rao, 2002) and that textbook developers assume that activity items, which require elements of creativity from learners, will not work effectively in their classrooms, and thus they hesitate to adopt them in their textbooks.

5. Conclusion

5.1 Summary and recommendations

In summary, this study reveals that activity items concerned with text comprehension appear to play an important role in some selected English I textbooks used in Japan, as they take up around 40 to 50 percent of all the activity items employed in the textbooks, which is the largest proportion within the seven categories set in this study. The study also makes it clear that most of the text-comprehension activity items ask students mainly to decode meaning from the texts, or to find facts in the texts, while there are only a limited number of activity items which require students to make inferences, apply general knowledge, draw on personal experiences, form their own opinions, and make their own descriptions. As a matter of fact, these mental operations are important processes as they often turn out to be useful in the real world (Nunan, 1989), and at the same time they will, if practiced properly, serve to discourage students from trying to learn only by repetition and memorization, which happens to be a traditional Japanese learning technique (Carson, 1992). With this issue in mind, a recommendation for deepening students' understanding of texts would be to simply increase the number of these activity items and strengthen their cognitive ability, as suggested by Seki (1993) and Watanabe (1992).

As one way to implement this recommendation, it may be an idea for textbook writers or classroom teachers to add to the sample text quoted below, such comprehension-check questions as the following: (1) About how many people do you imagine from the expression 'a large crowd of people?'; (2) At which gate of the station do you think the 'large crowd of people' is/are standing?; (3) Around what time do you think the word 'late' refers to in this context?; (4) About how old do you think the oldest and the youngest are in this crowd?; and (5) Why are 'some of them' talking in sign language?

A large crowd of people stands in front of Kita Senju Station in Adachi-ku, Tokyo, late on a Friday night. The crowd is made up of men and women of all ages. Some of them are talking in sign language.

(Prominence English I, 2006:44)

Alternatively, it is suggested that textbooks provide activities which ask students to make up such questions by themselves, or activities which ask them to draw pictures of situations from

the descriptions in the text. As Cots (2006) says in his study, such activities as suggested here will lead the students to understand texts deeper and help them realize that it is not always easy to draw clear pictures from the descriptions in texts, and such activities will help develop their critical awareness on the limitations of textbooks.

In order for more of these activity items involving various mental operations to be adopted in textbooks, it is desirable that university entrance examinations too adopt questions which involve mental operations similar to the ones shown above. This will help students use various mental operations and thus develop their skills for interpreting and evaluating texts.

5.2 Limitations of the study and future study

As with all research, this study suffers from a number of limitations. One limitation of this study is that, due to time constraints, it did not make clear what types of mental operations activity items for comprehending spoken texts require students to do. In addition, the study evaluated only four of the thirty-five textbooks used for the class 'English I' in Japanese senior high schools. This means that the study cannot claim to present all the facts about Japanese school textbooks. Furthermore, the fact that actually only one person evaluated the textbooks may indicate that the evaluation results are less reliable compared to when more than one person are involved in the evaluation. These limitations show that there is a need to focus on activity items for comprehending spoken texts, a need to study other English textbooks, and also a need to involve more researchers in this field.

In spite of the limitations enumerated so far, it is hoped that this research will contribute to gaining deeper insights into the nature of comprehension-check activities adopted in English textbooks for Japanese students. The recommendations made in this study will offer a new starting point for discussion for a textbook design that will help students develop their skills for interpreting and evaluating texts. Lastly, the framework established in this study for textbook evaluation, can be used for evaluation of other textbooks in similar contexts from the viewpoint of deepening students' understanding of texts, which may be considered another contribution of this study.

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