

The Input and Output of Activity Exercises in Senior High School English Textbooks

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1. Introduction

The current English education policy in Japan emphasizes the importance of developing the students' communication skills. This has been demonstrated in the *Action plan to cultivate 'Japanese with English abilities'* promulgated in 2003 by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports and Technology (hereafter, Ministry of Education, for short) as well as in the overall objectives set forth in the revised national curriculums (i.e., the courses of study) for teaching foreign languages in elementary schools, junior high schools, and senior high schools in the country (Ministry of Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2009).

In measuring to what extent textbooks have been designed to reflect this policy and whether the students' communication skills have been developed as intended, one of the key factors may be the concept of "discourse," as most communication takes place at the level of discourse, rather than the word/phrase or sentence level (Matsuhata & Wada, 1995). In this respect, the revised national curriculums (e.g., the Ministry of Education, 2008b) have newly begun to refer particularly to language activities at the discourse level (Wakaari, 2009). For this reason, it will be useful to examine to what extent activity exercises contained in the actual textbooks are really providing the input and output required at the level of discourse.

2. Literature review

There are several studies which have taken up the issue of input and output in English textbooks (e.g., Guilloteaux, 2013; Littlejohn, 1998), and some of them have analyzed textbooks adopted and used in the Japanese school education context (e.g., Ito, 1992; Ueda, Miyasaka, & Yamazaki, 1999). However, these studies focused mainly on the relationship between the input of textbooks and the output from students, and did not pay sufficient attention to what forms of output is being required in those activities, which is essential in understanding the nature of English textbooks adopted in Japan. With this issue in mind, Wakaari (2005), as part of his investigation into the textbooks from the viewpoint of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), examined the input provided and the output expected, by choosing three

widely-used junior high school English textbooks adopted in Japan. Based on the analysis framework developed by Littlejohn (1998), Wakaari (2005) classified the input into seven groups, namely (1) graphic, (2) Oral words/phrases, (3) Oral extended discourse, (4) Written words/phrases, (5) Written extended discourse, (6) Sounds/music, and (7) Written Japanese. Similarly, the output expected of students in the activities was categorized into seven groups, namely (1) Number, tick, circle, (2) Oral words/phrases, (3) Oral extended discourse, (4) Written words/phrases, (5) Written extended discourse, (6) Oral Japanese, (7) Written Japanese. The results of the analysis of the input showed that written input, especially written words/phrases, was the most frequently used form, probably because it was considered easier than oral input for students at the basic level to understand the instruction and therefore reduced the risk of misunderstanding. As regards the output, the results showed that most activities in the textbooks required only oral output from students, especially in the form of oral words/phrases, which is interpreted to reflect the textbooks' emphasis on oral communication, following Japan's educational policy for foreign languages. On the other hand, there were only a limited number of activities requiring written extended discourses, which fact may indicate that the principles of CLT in this area have not yet been fully adopted by textbooks in general.

While Wakaari (2005) examined the output expected of the students in the activities, it did not examine its counterpart in senior high school English textbooks. This suggested a need for further research on this issue.

3. Methods

3.1 Research questions

With the above-mentioned need in mind, the research questions are set as follows:

- (1) What forms of input are provided to senior high school students in the activity items contained in the selection of senior high school textbooks?
- (2) What forms of output are expected of the students in the activity items contained in those textbooks?

The term "activity item" in these questions is defined as an item which is contained in one activity. For example, the following reading-comprehension activity has two items.

Q1. What size bathing suit does Daisuke want?

Q2. How much is the bathing suit?

(*Sunshine English Course 2*, 2002:84-85)

3.2 Textbooks to be evaluated

In order to answer the research questions, textbooks for “English I” were chosen for analysis, as this course was taken by the largest number of students among the English-related courses. “English I” was also one of the base courses for senior high school students learning English.

Since there were as many as thirty-five textbooks for “English I” and also because of the limited time available, it was necessary to narrow down the scope of the present research. As a result, the following four textbooks were selected: *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 selected because their publishers kept the largest share in the number of adoptions for “English I” (Watanabe, 2005) and also because it obviously targeted students with advanced English skills. These common features have made it possible to conduct a comparative analysis among the four textbooks selected.

3.3 Criteria for evaluation

In this study, the following two criteria are adopted to examine activities used in the textbooks: input to learners and expected output from learners. The first criterion is concerned with what forms of input are provided to learners in the activity items of the textbooks under analysis. In this study, the input is classified into the following 11 forms, based on Guilloteaux (2013) and Littlejohn (1998): (1) Words or phrases spoken in English; (2) Sentences spoken in English; (3) Extended discourses spoken in English; (4) Words or phrases written in English; (5) Sentences written in English; (6) Extended discourses written in English; (7) Spoken Japanese; (8) Written Japanese; (9) Relevant visual cues; (10) Essential visual cues; and (11) Descriptions of situations. Of these forms of input, the discourse is defined on the basis of Littlejohn (1998) as a text of more than 50 words with a coherence containing certain supra-sentential features (e.g., grammatical and lexical cohesion). The difference between essential visual cues and relevant visual cues is that essential visual cues are defined on the basis of Yamamoto (1992) such as those which are considered essential in completing the activities, while relevant visual cues do not have such necessity for activities (See Figure 1 and 2 as examples). The descriptions of situations are defined as written information in Japanese or English which explains the situation for the activity.

The criterion of “Expected output from learners” is concerned with what forms of output are expected of the learners by the activities in the textbooks. In this study, the output is classified into the following 9 types, based on Littlejohn (1998): (1) Words or phrases spoken in English;



Figure 1 An example of essential visual cues, adopted from *Prominence English I* (2006, Tokyo Shoseki)

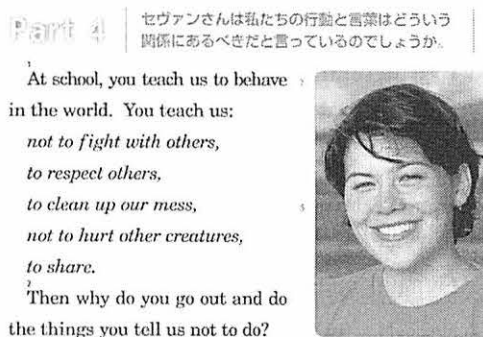


Figure 2 An example of relevant visual cues, adopted from *Prominence English I* (2006, Tokyo Shoseki)

(2) Sentences spoken in English; (3) Extended discourses spoken in English; (4) Words or phrases written in English; (5) Sentences written in English; (6) Extended discourses written in English; (7) Spoken Japanese; (8) Written Japanese; (9) Others. As with the case of input, a discourse is defined as a text of more than 50 words with a coherence containing some supra-sentential features (Littlejohn, 1998). The last category “Others” includes non-verbal outputs such as matching items and using gestures.

For some of the activities, output from learners has to be inferred, since no clear instruction is provided for it (e.g., Answer the following question), as shown below. (The double-underline shows that the instruction is given in Japanese, which applies to all the other double-underlines drawn in this paper.)

C In what way did the following scientists change our view of the world?

Isaac Newton (1642-1727)

Charles Darwin (1809-1882)

Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

(*Crown English Series I*, 2006:163)

4 Results and discussions

The number of activity items contained in the four textbooks are shown in Table 1. A total of 2,305 activity items were analyzed in this study.

Table 1 Number of activity items under analysis

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

4.1 Input to learners

Table 2 below shows what forms of input were given to learners in the activity items, as well as their number and ratio in the total number of inputs. According to the table, all of the textbooks are adopting various forms of input to learners, such as visual cues and instructions in Japanese, both of which are used to a certain degree in all the textbooks selected (12.9% and 17.0% respectively). Given that the use of visual cues is a characteristic feature of Communicative Language Teaching (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 2001), these figures seem to suggest that all of the textbooks are exemplifying this aspect of CLT.

However, a closer analysis of visual cues reveals that most of these cues adopted in the textbooks are not essential for conducting the activities: the activity items with the essential visual cues are less than a quarter of those with relevant visual cues. This is particularly true of Textbook D, in which the percentage of essential visual cues is less than one percent. As referred to by Yamamoto (1992), this limited use of essential visual cues may indicate that these textbooks do not use visual cues in so meaningful a manner as CLT-based textbooks.

More importantly, of the forms of input adopted in the activity items, written English is the most frequently used form of input, which is used about five times as frequently as spoken

Table 2 Forms of input in the activity items

Textbook	A	B	C	D	Total
N	635	728	396	546	2,305
SE ^a words/phrases (%)	33 (5.2%)	4 (0.5%)	0 (0.0%)	5 (0.9%)	42 (1.8%)
SE sentences (%)	72 (11.3%)	102 (14.0%)	0 (0.0%)	35 (6.4%)	209 (9.1%)
SE discourses (%)	49 (7.7%)	44 (6.0%)	31 (7.8%)	0 (0.0%)	124 (5.4%)
WE ^b words/phrases (%)	223 (35.1%)	218 (29.9%)	120 (30.3%)	221 (40.5%)	782 (33.9%)
WE sentences (%)	283 (44.6%)	229 (31.5%)	245 (61.9%)	203 (37.2%)	960 (41.6%)
WE discourses (%)	49 (7.7%)	42 (5.8%)	7 (1.8%)	94 (17.2%)	192 (8.3%)
Written Japanese (%)	63 (9.9%)	178 (24.5%)	96 (24.2%)	55 (10.1%)	392 (17.0%)
Relevant visual cues (%)	61 (9.6%)	67 (9.2%)	58 (14.6%)	55 (10.1%)	241 (10.5%)
Essential visual cues (%)	13 (2.0%)	30 (4.1%)	8 (2.0%)	4 (0.7%)	55 (2.4%)

Note. The sum of the percentage points in each textbook exceeds 100%, as some activity items provide learners with more than one form of input (e.g., a written English sentence and a relevant visual cue). There are no inputs in the forms of spoken Japanese nor sounds or music. ^a'SE' stands for 'Spoken English'. ^b'WE' stands for 'Written English'.

English. This tendency is especially notable in Textbook C and Textbook D, in which written input is used more than ten times as frequently as spoken input. This point differs greatly from the results of the earlier research on textbooks used in junior high schools, as the textbooks analyzed in that study adopted spoken English for at least more than 20% (Wakaari, 2005). This may be due to the growing emphasis on spoken English at the level of junior high schools (e.g., the *Action Plan*, 2003; the *Course of study for foreign languages in lower secondary schools*, 1998). At any rate, these rather unbalanced figures between written and spoken English in senior high school textbooks indicate that the textbooks do not take into account spoken English as much as they should.

In addition, of the written forms of input, inputs at the discourse level are used much less frequently than those at the word/phrase level or the sentence level, as seen in Textbook C, where only seven activity items are adopting written discourses (as an example, see activity items below). This may be because the textbooks are based on texts for reading, each of which consists of a number of paragraphs and they might have run out of space for written discourse inputs for activities. Nevertheless, as already mentioned, given that most communication takes place at the level of discourse rather than the word/phrase or sentence level (Matsuhata & Wada, 1995), the imbalance seen in these figures may suggest that the textbooks do not really consider this aspect of communication so seriously.

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)

4.2 Expected output from learners

Table 3 below shows what forms of output were expected of learners in the activity items, as well as their number and ratio in the total number of outputs. According to the table, most activity items in the textbooks require from learners written words/phrases or written sentences

Table 3 *Forms of expected output in the activity items*

Textbook	A	B	C	D	Total
N	635	728	396	546	2,305
SE ^a words/phrases (%)	19 (3.0%)	2 (0.3%)	9 (2.3%)	35 (6.4%)	65 (3.4%)
SE sentences (%)	200 (31.5%)	89 (12.2%)	22 (5.6%)	19 (3.5%)	330 (17.5%)
SE discourses (%)	5 (0.8%)	3 (0.4%)	7 (1.8%)	25 (4.6%)	40 (2.1%)
WE ^b words/phrases (%)	193 (30.4%)	215 (29.5%)	119 (30.1%)	268 (49.1%)	795 (42.2%)
WE sentences (%)	148 (23.3%)	157 (21.6%)	133 (33.6%)	114 (20.9%)	552 (29.3%)
WE discourses (%)	7 (1.1%)	1 (0.1%)	2 (0.5%)	11 (2.0%)	21 (1.1%)
Spoken Japanese (%)	0 (0.0%)	8 (1.1%)	11 (2.8%)	0 (0.0%)	19 (0.8%)
Written Japanese (%)	1 (0.2%)	61 (8.4%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	62 (2.7%)
Others (%)	216 (34.0%)	197 (27.1%)	96 (24.2%)	97 (17.8%)	606 (26.3%)

Note. The sum of the percentage points in each textbook exceeds 100%, as some activity items require more than one form of output from learners. (e.g., an oral sentence and a written sentence). ^a‘SE’ stands for ‘Spoken English’. ^b‘WE’ stands for ‘Written English’.

as output. This tendency is especially notable in Textbook D, in which the ratios of written words/phrases and written sentences exceed 70%, as seen in the activity item below. This result is in contrast to that of the analysis of textbooks adopted in junior high schools, as most activity items in the latter textbooks require spoken output from learners (Wakaari, 2005). This difference between the two groups of textbooks (i.e., junior and senior high school textbooks) may be attributed to the levels of learners, since junior high school students, especially those in the first year, are still at the beginning stage in their learning of English and, besides, the skill of writing is generally considered as the most difficult to acquire among the four language skills (Richards, 1990). Nevertheless, considering more emphasis on oral communication in the Japan’s educational policy, these unbalanced figures need to be improved.

Fill in the blanks with appropriate words.

1. The new boy got along well () the others in the class.
2. He didn’t think much () my idea.
3. I’ll share this cake () you.
4. Are you familiar () this kind of machine?
5. We have at last found the key () the door.

(*Voyager English Course I*, 2006:21)

The results from the present study also show that all the textbooks selected introduce a limited amount of written discourse activity exercises. Given that most of the activity items classified into “Others” ask the students to choose from multiple answers, these results may have something to do with the type of questions on entrance examinations to colleges and

universities. They mostly employ multiple choice questions and do not normally require written work at the discourse level from the examinees, probably due to the issue of practicality—namely, the difficulty in ensuring the objectivity in marking their answers. The questions on the National Center Tests, for example, are all based on the multiple-choice type and computers are used for marking them. However, in real-life situations, the skill of writing coherently at the discourse level is often more important, because, in writing, accuracy in the use of words, phrases and sentences alone is not sufficient, as pointed out by Hirata (2008) and Richards (1990). From this point of view, it must be said that the textbooks adopted in senior high schools do not really deal with this aspect of written communication.

On the other hand, the fact can be positively evaluated that, unlike most of the activity items in the textbooks for junior high schools, the activity items requiring written output at the discourse level in senior high school textbooks are not putting too many restrictions on the students' output, as is usually the case with CLT-based materials (Harmer, 2001).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Summary and recommendations

The results of the analysis showed that the textbooks contained a number of limitations in the input and output of activities, which may be summarized as follows: (1) A limited number of inputs in spoken forms; (2) A limited number of inputs at the written discourse level; (3) A limited number of essential visual cues; (4) A limited number of outputs in spoken forms; (5) A limited number of outputs at the written discourse level. As for the limitations (1)-(3), the recommendation here is simply for textbook writers to improve the balance between these activity items and other forms of input. However, it may not be so easy to increase the number of inputs in spoken forms and written inputs at the discourse level, because such increases will entail a heavy burden on textbook developers in terms of costs as well as efforts. Given that they have to produce textbooks within a certain price range enforced by the Ministry's regulations (Wakabayashi, 1994), implementing these changes may not be feasible under the present system of textbook production. Therefore, in order to make it possible, the present system of producing textbooks needs to be re-examined and the government should provide more subsidies to the production of textbooks. These suggestions may not be so far-fetched, considering the fact that, according to newspaper reports, the Meeting on Education Rebuilding (active: September 2007-January 31, 2008, under the first Abe Administration) recommended doubling the pages of English textbooks (e.g., *The Sankei Shimbun*, December 19, 2008) and

that, following such recommendations, the Ministry of Education finally decided to relax its control on the number of pages for textbooks to be used in senior high schools (e.g., *The Asahi Shimbun*, August 8, 2009). Thus, if the government decides to increase its support for textbook production, it will be possible for textbook publishing companies to increase the amount of written discourse in their textbooks. It may also be possible for them to attach to their textbooks audio-materials for listening purposes, as suggested by Otake (1993), Shimoda (1993), and Tsuchiya (1982), and such materials are already available in many of the ELT materials published on the international market (e.g., Craven, 2008; Hutchinson, 2007).

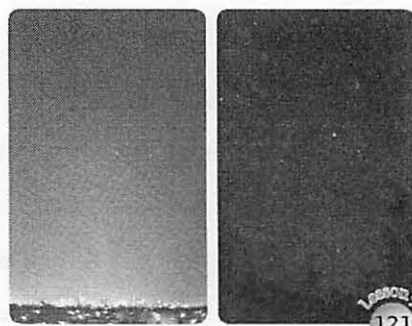
Compared with the efforts to increase inputs in spoken forms and inputs at the discourse level, it will probably be easier to increase the number of visual cues which are essential in completing activities. Given the fact that a number of visual cues contained in the textbooks are not being properly used (Yamamoto, 1992), all textbook developers need to do is to design some appropriate activities based on these visual cues, as shown in the following activity.

Quiz Prominence:

How are the two pictures different?

Talk about any differences you find.

(*Prominence English I*, 2006:121)



These two pictures can be interpreted differently by different learners and thus create desirable information gaps easily (Wright, 1989; Yamamoto, 1992). As with the example of interpretation tasks (Nitta & Gardner, 2005), activities such as this one will provide students with opportunities to use language for communication with their classmates.

With regard to the limitations (4) and (5), given that, unlike the case of inputs, outputs will not be limited by issues such as the volume of textbooks, the basic recommendation for textbook producers is simply to increase activities involving spoken forms of outputs and discourse-level outputs in written forms. As one way to increase discourse-level outputs, it may be an idea to provide a list of topics for speaking or writing, from which students can choose some which they would like to take up and present it in class in the form of discussions in pairs/groups or submit it to the teacher as part of their writing assignments. The reason for making these activities optional rather than mandatory is because, if all these discourse-level activities are to be evaluated

by one teacher, it will impose a huge burden on him/her. Such a burden will eventually make the activities less practical, given the teachers' already heavy workload (Wakabayashi, 1983).

In relation to this issue, it may be important for the Ministry of Education to re-examine its strict control on the vocabulary in textbooks. It is assumed that the Ministry's vocabulary control on textbooks is intended to prevent higher institutions like universities from using relatively less frequently used words in their entrance examinations, so that the students can focus on the full use of the more basic vocabulary for communication. However, excessive control on vocabulary such as the one introduced by the courses of study for both junior and senior high schools (1998, 1999) is likely to limit the potential for developing the students' communication skills (Hirata, 2008), which needs to be avoided at any cost.

5.2 Limitations of the present study and its future goals

As with other studies, this research suffers from several limitations. First, due to time constraints, the study evaluated only four of the thirty-five "English I" textbooks in senior high schools in Japan. This suggests that the research cannot claim to cover all English textbooks adopted in all schools. Second, only one researcher evaluated the textbooks, which might indicate that the results of the investigation may be less reliable compared to when more than one researchers are involved in the evaluation. Third, the study did not examine the quality of output expected of learners, such as vocabulary and grammar items used and the mental operations involved (e.g., applying general knowledge, negotiating) along with the question of whether it is closed-ended or open-ended. Given that these criteria are closely related to the characteristic features of CLT, such detailed analyses, if conducted, will offer much deeper insights into the nature of output expected of and achieved by the students using the English textbooks adopted in the Japanese school context.

In spite of these limitations, however, it is hoped that this study will contribute to giving a sufficient amount of insights into the type of input and output requirements in activity exercises to be contained in English textbooks. The recommendations made in this research will be of use in providing a starting point for further discussion on the development of materials which will help enhance our students' communication skills.

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