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.

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).

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.

This study also investigated the quality of *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions*, in terms of length of text, three stages during reading, multiple levels of thinking, and various mental operations ensuring from the activity items.

As for length of text, this study shows that most of the *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions* in the selected textbooks require students to read more than 50 words of text. Thus, the necessity of reading such long passages might be burden on the students.

This study also shows that most of the *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions* in the selected textbooks appeared in the while-reading or post-reading stage, with only a limited number of pre-reading questions. Taking into account the effect of pre-reading activities as claimed by Koike (2003) and Oshita (2009), more *inferential questions* or *evaluative questions* in the pre-reading stage should be applied to the textbooks, in order to elicit learners’ preliminary knowledge or motivate them.

As for levels of thinking and mental operations, this study discovered that the selected textbooks contained significant numbers of useful *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions* for fostering students’ ability to interpret and evaluate texts. Nevertheless, the *inferential questions* and *evaluative questions* are not fully distributed into diverse subcategories. This suggests that a greater variety of mental operations needs to be applied to the textbooks, in order to foster students’ skills of thinking logically or critically.
References

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