Learner Needs and Materials Choice:
A Critical Analysis of how Textbook Choice Methods Matches Learner
Needs for a Group of Language Learners.

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Abstract

This paper examined two coursebooks on an English language programme: “Discoveries” (Abbs and Freebairn 1986) and “Open Doors” (Whitney 1994), and analyzed them in terms of how well they matched the aims of that programme. It was found that “Open Doors” had significant advantages in both its treatment of vocabulary and in its incorporation of communicative language activities.

Introduction

In English language education the use of textbooks is so widespread that it is regarded by many students and teachers alike as the basis of their courses. In fact, in the majority of institutions the instructor has no option but to use a textbook. If they are fortunate, they themselves select it; if not, it is selected for them. Although more experienced teachers may use textbooks sparingly, it is thought that for most teachers the choice of textbook largely determines not only the items to be taught (i.e. the syllabus content) but also, to an extent, the manner in which it is taught (i.e. the methodology). This paper looks specifically at the issue of textbook choice in a junior high school programme and evaluates the material in terms of how well it meets the learners' needs. The author chose to focus specifically on a junior high school programme rather than on, for example, learners in university education as it was felt that decisions made in these early years have a greater impact on students' later attempts to learn language.

This paper examines two textbooks that were used on the programme. The

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first, a book that was considered problematic, “Discoveries” (Abbs and Freebairn 1986), and the book that was used to replace it, “Open Doors” (Whitney 1994). It is divided into four main parts; a background section giving information about the particular teaching situation at the school and some reference to the education system in general, a brief overview of some current thinking on textbook choice and syllabus, a more detailed analysis of the strengths of the two books in relation to this teaching situation and, lastly, a section for conclusions.

A number of factors should be borne in mind. Firstly, both texts are European culturally based and therefore share some obvious problems as regards suitability for Japanese students. Secondly, both textbooks were published a number of years ago and thus many of the references contained within the books are dated.

Finally, it should be said that it is not within the scope of this paper to deal comprehensively with all the issues involved so an attempt has been made to focus on the key issues felt most relevant to the learners.

**Background**

The English programme, considered here, was set up with an overall aim to teach British English and to improve students' general speaking and listening skills. And, in so doing, complement the curriculum offered by the Japanese English teachers. A further aim was that, as every student in the second year goes on a home stay study trip to England, the programme hoped to provide these students with sufficient functional language and cultural information to function effectively in the UK. The British teachers meet a particular class three or four times a week for 50 minutes a time. The class size is about 30-40 students of age between 12 and 15 and is conducted with a Japanese team-teacher present. One of these lessons is in a smaller group with a class size of about 12 students.

**Literature Overview**

There is, perhaps, no ideal textbook for a given group of learners, as by the very nature of individual differences a text must involve some degree of compromise. As Nunan (1991) puts it, “any given coursebook will be incapable of catering for the diversity of needs which exists in most language classrooms”. Broadly speaking, however, a coursebook should be, “at the correct linguistic level (provide) useful
teaching material, form part of a coherent whole with progression, practice...skills in a balanced and integrated way and be interesting and motivating” (1995).

Two fundamental criteria are identified by Cunningsworth, they are that a textbook, “should correspond to learners’ needs...should match the aims and objectives of the language-learning programme” and, “should reflect the uses (present or future) which learners will make of the language”.

Additionally, Nunan (1991) suggests evaluators look at the authenticity of the language, appropriacy and currency of the topics, situations and contexts, whether the book is pitched at the right level and, whether or not the textbook accomplishes what it purports to.

Allwright (1981) adds that teaching learners to be “better learners” is an important factor in the role of teachers and teaching materials, as courses are only finite in length and students may wish to carry on learning effectively, perhaps even without a teacher.

**Analysis**

**Vocabulary**

One of the major student requirements at the school is to pass the Obunsha Eiken tests. Virtually every student, particularly at the lower levels (i.e. Eiken 3 & 4), takes the test as a routine part of the school’s curriculum and it has enormous face validity, as it is a requirement for entry to many universities. Although it is not always possible for the more communicative courses offered by the British team to complement the English courses taught by the Japanese teachers in their Eiken preparation, one area where it should be able to contribute is in enlarging students’ vocabulary.

“Discoveries” and “Open Doors” both possess printed vocabulary lists in their Teacher’s books, so in order to ascertain how closely these lexis correspond to students’ Eiken requirements, the numbers were counted and compared to the printed lists in the Obunsha ‘Studybook’, Akao, F. (1997). Looking essentially at Eiken 4 (the main exam that all students must take by the time they leave the Junior High School) it can be seen that they both match the Eiken vocabulary lists relatively closely. “Open Doors” though, is a better fit with around 690 of the 780 core requirement words of Eiken 4 to “Discoveries” approximately 610.

Vocabulary plays an important role in aiding communicative competence (a
stated aim of the programme). As Cunningsworth (1995) notes, “particularly at lower levels, students can communicate more effectively with a knowledge of vocabulary than with a knowledge of grammar”. He suggests that in evaluating a particular coursebook the question of whether there is any underlying principled basis for selection of vocabulary should be asked. Carter (1987) adds that the criteria for selecting vocabulary should be, “frequency” (of usage), “coreness” (e.g. a word’s substitutability), “universality (words useful in all countries)” and, “utility” (words which enable discussion).

With “Discoveries” it is often difficult to see where such principles might have been applied. Early on in the text low frequency words are introduced with little ‘coreness value’ such as “remains/gateway” (p.24), “sequinned” (p.31) and “labrador” (p.36). When the text first presents a lexical set based on people’s jobs it introduces “pharmacist, construction engineer and motorbike mechanic” Book 2 (p.2) with no mention of higher frequency words such as nurse, policeman and secretary for example. It would seem also that these words are not just presented for passive recognition, as in many cases a task is presented that requires the words to be actively processed. To illustrate the point, in book 2 (p.28), a presentation states that Mozart wrote, “operas, symphonies and sonatas” again relatively low-frequency vocabulary items that don’t seem to fit well into Carter’s suggested criteria above (given this is an elementary level textbook) and subsequently asks students, “What sort of things did Mozart write?”

In addition to the criteria for vocabulary selection, it is important that words should be actively consolidated and reviewed. As Cunningsworth puts it, “Recycling of new vocabulary in different contexts is also necessary to ensure effective learning” (1995). This is an area where “Open Doors” is particularly strong as not only is there evidence of systematic recycling throughout the students book (with a firm emphasis on groupings and lexical sets) but the vocabulary is also practised in the workbook in a variety of different formats. By contrast, the “Discoveries” workbook does very little to consolidate the vocabulary presented in the corresponding chapter of the student’s book instead adding, often uncontextualized, new vocabulary items.

**Listening Skills**

Improving students’ listening skills is a further explicitly stated aim of the programme and another area of student need as students get little opportunity to
develop these skills in the regular curriculum. Task-based listening activities also form part of the aforementioned Eiken tests.

In Cunningworth’s checklist for listening activities, he asks whether or not the coursebook contains specific listening passages in meaningful contexts and what kind of activities it bases on them (1995). Looking at the “Discoveries” series, one’s initial impression is that it is extremely short on specific listening passages. At a rough estimate there seems to be one or two short tasks in every “Roundup” chapter, which appear every fifth lesson. One of these tasks is merely a gap-fill aimed at consolidating some work from the previous five units; the other, however, is more varied requiring students to process information in a number of ways. However, these tasks appear infrequently and are rather short, usually with no pre-listening or follow-up tasks. Furthermore, there are instances where these tasks have been badly organized. For example, in lesson 22 of “Students’ Book 2” (p.34) there is an activity that ostensibly requires students to listen to some directions and find the name of the places where the directions lead. On the surface, this would appear an engaging task with students listening to a tape and following the directions on a map. However, when the directions are given the name of the place is also stated (i.e. the answer) effectively rendering the need to listen to the directions redundant.

With “Open Doors” listening is given a higher priority with listening tasks appearing systematically throughout a chapter’s development requiring students to listen and process information in various ways. Generally, there are contextualised pre-listening and post-listening tasks.

Brown (1994) identifies what he terms as a “reactive listening” whereby, “students listen to the surface structure of an utterance for the sole purpose of repeating it back”. Although he believes there is a questionable level of processing of the target language, he argues that it is a “legitimate” part of an interactive classroom, particularly when used in, “brief choral or individual drills that focus on pronunciation”. Both the texts under discussion here use “reactive listening” systematically (in a ‘listen and repeat’ format), particularly “Open Doors” which not only uses it in its opening dialogues, but also in setting up communicative pairworks and when presenting new vocabulary. A benefit of this technique, that has been observed, is that it helps build confidence. This is often lacking in young Japanese learners who may be sensitive about making mistakes in front of their peers, Thompson (1987).
**Speaking Skills**

Connected to the above and of equal importance to the aims of the native-speaker teachers on the programme is improving students’ speaking skills. This is assigned high priority in both the coursebooks’ approach and they both systematically provide opportunities for students to speak. In fact they are very similar in the way they present and organize speaking tasks, giving a clear model followed by some form of prompts. “Open Doors” extends this by modelling its target sentences via a ‘listen and repeat’ format. Additionally, in the Teacher’s book it presents photocopiable information gap (generally pairwork) activities, which have proved popular with the instructors as supplementary material, particularly for the small group classes.

Nunan (1988) argues that an important aspect of communicative tasks is that there should be opportunities for personalisation. Both texts are strong in this regard although in “Discoveries”, there are some instances of such tasks being unrealistic. For example, a follow-up to a speaking task in “Discoveries” Book 2 (p.26) asks students to pretend they are their own parents writing a note to say why their child was not at school today. Although there is a personal aspect to this task, it proved problematic both because of the difficulty students had in imagining this unfamiliar situation and because they were shy to perform the task.

**Coursebook Structure and Grammar**

We saw in the above the need for the recycling of lexical items. There is also a need for structured content progression and logical sequencing and staging of linguistic items, Cunningworth (1995). In “Open Doors” this principle is applied with the themes developing clearly and progressively throughout each of the units. There is also effective recycling of grammar points. For example, in Book 1 the learner meets the present continuous tense (affirmative and negative form) followed by a contrast with the (previously introduced) present simple tense. In the next chapter it gives the affirmative form with another contrast to the present simple. And in the following chapter it gives the future meaning of the present continuous tense contrasting it with its present meaning. In the next chapter, it is recycled again alongside a presentation of “going to” for future meaning. Also, within the units these grammar points are recycled, but with a different focus in the “skills sections” (and the workbook contains supplementary self-study materials, if required).
The presentation of grammar in “Open Doors” tends to follow an inductive approach with students invited to make the rule or complete a grammar table themselves; it has explicit and implicit grammatical reasoning. This would seem in line with Rutherford (1987) and his idea of a productive role for grammatical ‘consciousness-raising’ with respect to critical features of the target language system. “Discoveries” on the other hand, tends to ‘feed’ the information, or a rule in the form of a completed table, the so-called ‘deductive’ approach, which, although has been criticized, is arguably in line with student expectations. It may actually therefore suit some learners better than an inductive approach.

However, a problem with “Discoveries” is that, as with the vocabulary, there is little recycling of grammar from one unit to the next. Typically, a unit involves a dialogue presentation, four or five practice activities and then on to a new, sometimes unrelated, topic. Additionally, the syllabus is occasionally badly sequenced. A noticeable example of this is that it introduces the alphabet more than halfway through Book 1 (Chapter 26) after it has introduced a number of structures and a number of reading passages for which knowledge of the alphabet is necessary. This clearly ignores the hierarchical nature of language learning.

“Open Doors” is problematic, also, in that the level of the language in the first unit is rather high for the learners on the programme. It tackles a number of key areas straight away making it difficult to use without first doing preparatory work.

Motivation

Where younger learners are concerned there are particular challenges involved in keeping them motivated and engaged. Harmer points out that, as attention span is generally low, learners need frequent changes of activity and that, unlike with adult learners, there may be little or no extrinsic motivation (1995).

One problem noticeable with the “Discoveries” text is that it uses choral drilling for its entire opening dialogues no matter how long they are, rather than just selecting more manageable chunks. Instructors on the course have frequently observed that students were unable to maintain concentration for the duration of those passages. This problem is avoided in “Open Doors” which, by contrast, tends to focus on shorter, snappier tasks.

To an extent, the selection of either text brings with it a level of sacrifice of stimulating content material, as they are both European culturally based. Thus, the references contained within them may be unfamiliar and lack a feeling of relevance
to the lives of the learners. However, the decision to use such a text was felt important to introduce the students to some of the features of life in the UK, which they will encounter on their homestay trips to England.

Language level is also an important factor in harnessing student motivation. Harmer (1995) notes, “getting the level of challenge right is vital—where it is too high they (students) may become discouraged and de-motivated”. We saw in the above section on vocabulary, that often low frequency words are introduced in the “Discoveries” text, which are inappropriate to the level. This tendency, it was felt, had a negative impact on motivation.

**Learner strategies**

In addition to Allwright’s comments on making “better learners” (1981) that we saw in the section above, Skehan (1989) states, “There is now considerable evidence from self-report and observational studies that learners use a variety of strategies”. Also, Nunan (1991) notes that “good learners” use a number of strategies to help them learn.

Neither of the texts gives a high priority to learner strategies, perhaps because young learners are less likely to reflect on their own learning. “Open Doors” does, however, contain a short section called “Study skills” which appears in every chapter. This exposes students to such ideas as vocabulary memorising techniques and strategies for overcoming communication problems. It also invites students to share their learning ideas.

**Conclusions**

This paper compared two British English coursebooks to see the extent to which they match the needs of a group of Japanese junior high school students in a native-speaker English programme. The analysis revealed a range of key areas where the “Open Doors” text was considered more appropriate for the learners than the book which it replaced, “Discoveries”.

For vocabulary, it was found that the replacement text was superior in that there is a more principled approach to the recycling of items. And, the vocabulary contained within the book more closely matches the words necessary for the students to pass their Eiken tests. For grammar, the analysis was less conclusive in terms of presentation, but it was felt that the replacement text has clear advantages in its
approach to sequencing, staging and progression of language points.

It was noted above that the central aim of the programme was to improve students’ communicative competence. In this respect, also, it was found that the replacement text “Open Doors” has clear advantages. For example, it has a greater range of, and better-organized, activities for listening practice. It also has more stimulating and realistic speaking activities. All of these findings have, to an extent, been confirmed by the observations of the instructors on the programme where the decision to replace the text has proved popular.

Overall, perhaps the most striking conclusion to be drawn from the above is that there is a wide range of factors to be considered when selecting a textbook and choosing well (or choosing to use alternative learning materials) is of paramount importance as it can have far-reaching effects. Student motivation, programme aims and many other factors are directly influenced by this decision.

Bibliography

Coursebooks: