

Methods for Evaluating Communicative Approach Based English Grammar Textbooks

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1. Introduction

Suppose there is a project to write a new English grammar textbook for the first grade of senior high school in Japan. I have been invited to carry out a formative evaluation of this project as an outside expert before it goes to be printed. There is time to revise it to be more suitable. The period of evaluation is one year from April in 2003 to March in 2004. An adopted syllabus of the textbook designed by a leading expert is a communicative approach. Traditional grammar textbooks focus on structure, but this is a new project to make the textbook more communicative. The textbook is aimed at developing writing skills by using from controlled to freer activities. The purpose of evaluation is to see to what extent the activities the writers proposed are adequate for and consistent with the methodology the writers claimed, which is a communicative approach. Firstly, in the next section, I shall define what is meant by a communicative approach in this study. Then, in section 3, I shall explain how a communicative approach is interpreted in Japan to make clear the Japanese context. In section 4, four evaluation procedures that I would use are presented by providing the factors that I would take into consideration. Finally, suggestions for improvement will be made to the authorities and to the writers according to the results obtained from the procedures.

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2. What is a communicative approach?

Communication tasks are defined as tasks where learners are aimed at developing in part communicative skills to use English in a real communication situation and they are in part linguistic development (Nobuyoshi and Ellis, 1993). Focused on teaching procedures of a communicative approach, there are four types of activities: mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills and communicative activities (cf. Paulston, 1932/92). Drills involve repeated and controlled use of language. Mechanical drills are the most controlled. In communicative activities, language use is free and not necessarily repeated. What should be the place of communicative activities in a lesson? Howatt (1984: 279) makes a distinction between strong and weak versions of communicative approach. The 'strong' version of communicative approach claims that language is acquired through communication. It can be described as 'using English to learn it'. Only communicative activities are used, and communicative drills are omitted in this version. The strong version does not proceed gradually from mechanical or meaningful drills to communicative drills (cf. Johnson, 1982: 156), but starts from communicative activities. The weak version of communicative approach stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes. It can be described as 'learning to use English'. With regard to production, it starts from mechanical or meaningful drills that build up abilities to engage in communicative activities. It gradually shifts to communicative drills or communicative activities that are more difficult. Communicative activities are used at the last stage. The weak version is adopted in this textbook. The weak version of communicative approach is *more suitable for this context than the strong one*. This is because traditional textbooks are structures-based, so that drastic change into the strong version of a communicative approach would not be accepted by many teachers and also students.

3. Features of the context

How is a communicative approach interpreted in Japan? One situation in

which a communicative approach has become discussed in Japan is that in the course of proceeding internationalization. Japan came to play an important role in the world, and communication has become much more important. The other one is that the old methodologies have begun to be criticized, because Japanese have not been able to develop sufficient proficiency to enable to use English as a means of communication, despite receiving a minimum of three years of instruction (more usually six or eight years).

The last edition of the course of study (first published in 1989) is believed to have spurred the spread of communicative approach. English textbooks in Japan are written on the basis of the course of study. The course of study is a standard of education that the Ministry of Education establishes in order to realize the idea of equal opportunity and maintain the same standard of education in the whole Japan. All textbooks should be approved by the Ministry of Education before they are published. Each school has to organize the curriculum and put it into practice according to the standard shown in the course of study. Therefore it has a great influence on textbooks. The concept of 'communication' has become much more widely discussed in English teaching in Japan, because the new edition of the course of study, which was published in 2002, has changed into a more communication-oriented one.

Because of the influence of the course of study, teachers are more interested in adopting a communicative approach in the classroom than before. However, many Japanese English teachers are not accustomed to this new methodology and also expressing something in English, therefore they do not have much confidence in their own communicative competence, especially oral competence. Teachers' abilities refer not only to their English proficiency but also their teaching techniques. Many teachers are supposed not to know how to do communicative activities effectively. Another important element may be building a reliable relationship between the teacher and students. The ability to make a good atmosphere for communicative activities is an important aspect required to teachers. In this point, the big class size, which is usually more than 40 students in a typical language class, would be a problem. Because of this problem, each student can only take part in communicative activities for only a few minutes even if the whole class is devoted to communicative

activities.

4. The evaluation procedures

A framework for evaluation is generally given by Rea-Dickins and Germaine (1992). Firstly, we need to make clear the objectives of evaluation: what aspects to see, when the evaluation takes place, how to evaluate, and from where/who we are getting information. One of the evaluation methods that I would use is textbook analysis in order to collect data on the page. I will see whether a communicative activity is included in each lesson and whether activities are built up from controlled to freer ones. Other evaluation methods are real time classroom observation and questionnaires to teachers and students in order to see the textbook use in the classroom and outside. 10 model schools are chosen to observe lessons. These lessons are taught in the supplementary course during summer holiday for one month. The piloted textbook is used, which includes unit 1 to 4. Questionnaires to teachers and students will be conducted after the course has finished.

I shall provide a detailed rationale for one of the four evaluation procedures that I would use, which is the textbook analysis. All activities in the textbook are analyzed, which includes 20 units in total. The results of evaluation will be reported to the authorities, which are the Ministry of Education and the writers in the end of the year.

4.1. Textbook Analysis

The textbook is analyzed in terms of two sets of criteria framework. One is whether a communicative activity is included in each lesson, and the other is whether the series of activities are graded, beginning from mechanical or meaningful drills to communicative activities (these four types of tasks are more strictly defined below). Because the weak version of a communicative approach is adopted in the textbook, each lesson has to include a communicative activity. In addition, if drills are suddenly developed to free activities without enough practice, it would be too difficult for students.

4.1.1. Method

Criteria for the four types of tasks, which are mechanical, meaningful and

communicative drills and communicative activities, are clarified from three points of view: focus, control, and repetition (see Table 1). Focus refers to whether the activity is form-focused, meaning-focused, or communication-focused. Form-focused patterns include, for example, inflection, replacement or transformation in a certain sentence with a structure to be learned. This process is done automatically without thinking of the meaning of the sentence. Meaning-focused patterns are similar to form-focused ones, but this process is done with thinking of a sentence, for example, looking at a picture. Communication-focused patterns are done with a communicative purpose, that is, they include some kind of information gap. Control refers to the degree of language use: control of language or free use of language. In controlled activities, words or a structure is controlled. In free patterns, language use is not controlled, and learners can use any language at their disposal. Repetition refers to whether the activity is a drill or free. Repetition means the extent of repeated use of pattern. Drill means the repeated use of a repeated pattern. Free means the patterns are not necessarily repeated. From these three points of view, mechanical drills are form-focused, controlled and repeated patterns. Meaningful drills are meaning-focused, controlled and repeated patterns.

Table 1 Categories of types of activities

	Focus			Control		Repetition	
	form	meaning	Communi- cation	control	free	drill	free
mechanical drills	✓			✓		✓	
mechanical drills	✓			✓			✓
mechanical drills	✓				✓	✓	
mechanical drills	✓				✓		✓
meaningful drills		✓		✓		✓	
meaningful drills		✓		✓			✓
meaningful drills		✓			✓	✓	
meaningful drills		✓			✓		✓
commu. drills			✓	✓		✓	
commu. drills			✓	✓			✓
commu. drills			✓		✓	✓	
commu. activities			✓		✓		✓

Communicative drills are communication-focused, controlled and repeated patterns. Communicative activities are communication-focused and free use of language patterns.

The criteria of grading of the series of activities are shown below.

Fully graded = mechanical drills → meaningful drills → communicative drills
→ (communicative activities)

Fully graded = meaningful drills → communicative drills → communicative activities

Rather graded = mechanical drills → meaningful drills

Rather graded = meaningful drills → communicative drills

Rather graded = communicative drills → communicative activities

Non-graded = mechanical drills only, meaningful drills only, communicative drills only, or communicative activities only

Since there is such a variety of communicative activities (cf. Byrne, 1976/86, 1988), I shall categorize them according to three types of communication (cf. Smith, 1996) showing how they might correspond to each type of communication, which are communication of information, communication of emotion, and communication of opinion. Corresponding communicative activities of 'communication of information' include information exchange activities. For example, learners exchange information by using pictures with some kind of information gap. Communicative activities of 'communication of emotion' include role play. For example, learners have a task that a customer demands to return clothes and a shop assistant asks the reason in the supposed tailor's shop. Corresponding communicative activities for communication of opinion include problem-solving activities, discussion, and debate.

4.1.2. Results

Quantitative data can be available by counting the number of each activity type. From the overall number, general features of the textbook can be seen by using Table 2 below. For example, while there are a lot of mechanical drills, there are few communicative drills. While there are enough communicative activities, there is few communication of opinion. However, it does not mean if

Table 2 Types of Activities

Unit	Mechanical Drills	Meaningful Drills	Communicative Drills			Communicative Activities		
			info.	emotion	opinion	info.	emotion	opinion
1								
2								
20								
Total								

Table 3 Grading

Unit	Fully graded	Rather graded	Non-graded
1			✓
2			
20			
Total			

the number of communicative activities is fewer than the other tasks in one lesson, this lesson has to be revised. An important point is to see whether a communicative activity is included in each lesson, and whether various kinds of communication types such as information, emotion, or opinion are included with a good balance.

Another important information can be seen in Table 3. The other framework for textbook analysis is the grading of the series of activities. From the results in Table 3, it can be seen whether each unit is graded from mechanical drills, meaningful drills, communicative drills to communicative activities. For example, Unit 1 is non-graded in the table. This means even though a communicative activity is included in the lesson, it suddenly develops without enough structural practice. In that case, more activities should be put as a bridge. The detail information can be found from the results in Appendix 1.

4.2. Classroom Observation

Our observation scheme focuses on types of classroom interaction. Our main

Appendix 1 Textbook Analysis Form

Unit	Activity Number	Page	Focus					Control		Repetition		Types of activities A, B, C, D	Grading
			Form	Meaning	Communication			Control	Free	Drill	Free		
					information	emotion	opinio						
1	1												
	2												
	3												
	4												
	5												
2	1												
	2												
19	1												
	2												
	3												
	4												
	5												
20	1												
	2												
	3												
	4												
	5												
Total													

aim of this observation is to see whether the textbook is used successfully in the classroom. If interactions are shifted from teacher-centered to learner-centered as the stages of lesson are going on, we will judge that the textbook is successfully used as it is aimed.

We will observe lessons of the supplementary course during summer holiday. This is not to interfere the term time curriculum of each school, and not to consider tests. The number of the lessons is twice per week for one month, that is eight 50-minute-lessons in total. The textbook should be taught from Unit 1 to 4 in the order. The students who are supposed to attend this writing course can be considered more motivated than the others, because this course is not related with the other regular English courses and the results are not assessed. Before the real observation, the staffs are trained to observe other lessons in July (see Appendix 2). Donovan (1998) raises the cost of printing piloted materials as a problem. Ideally, every Unit in the textbook should be

Appendix 2 Timetable

Date	Procedures
April, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Set up the scheme of Evaluation (Textbook Analysis, Classroom Observation, Questionnaires to teachers and students) — Staff development plans
May, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Data gathering of Textbook Analysis — Report the results of Textbook Analysis to the authorities and the writers
June, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Select 10 model schools to observe lessons
July, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Compose Questionnaires to teachers and students — Observation practice — Print the piloted textbook (Unit 1-4) to be used in Classroom Observation
August, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Data gathering of Classroom Observation — Conduct Questionnaires to teachers and students
September, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Data Analysis of Classroom Observation and Questionnaires
October, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Make the reports to do implications and recommendations to the authorities and the writers
November, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Report the results of the whole evaluation to the authorities (the Ministry of Education) and the writers
December, 2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The writers revise the textbook again and Teacher's Book
February, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Print the final published form of the textbook
March, 2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Publish the textbook

piloted, but because of time and financial constraints, the first 4 units are used in the observation. We observe each lesson on real time in pair in order to make the results reliable.

4.3. Questionnaires to teachers

There are two main aims of conducting a questionnaire to Japanese English teachers. One is to ask whether teachers' materials are useful; for example, are detailed explanation of grammar rules given?, or is there enough information of the importance and the way of doing of each activity? The other is to see whether the textbook is successfully used in the classroom from teachers' viewpoints. Before the questionnaire is conducted, the draft is shown to other members of my evaluation team to reduce ambiguous questions. This is the same for the questionnaire to students.

The questionnaire is composed with *open-ended style questions* written in Japanese. A multiple-choice style is not used so as not to bias teachers by options or limit their answers. Also, the number of the teachers is too small to generalize the results. Because of the small number, open-ended style would be more suitable to get teachers' opinions and data analysis would not be too difficult. Japanese is used in the questionnaire because some teachers may feel uncomfortable to answer in English. The questionnaire is administered at the end of the summer course. The viewpoints for analysis are to see how the teachers feel when they use teachers' materials and how they use the textbook in the classroom especially communicative activities which are aimed to be used at the end of each lesson.

4.4. Questionnaires to students

The main aims of the questionnaire to the students are to see how they feel during a communicative activity, for example, is the activity interesting or difficult? etc.

One big difference from the questionnaire to teachers is that the questionnaire to students is combined with multiple-choice style and open-ended style questions written in Japanese. Multiple-choice questions are mainly used so as not to make students feel too much when they fill the

questions. The number of the students is larger than the teachers' number; therefore data analysis should be easier by using multiple-choice style. However, some interesting opinions can be obtained by open-ended style questions, they are sometimes put as options. Japanese is used in the questionnaire because each student's English proficiency should be various and not to cause misunderstanding of the questions. The questionnaire is administered at the end of the summer course.

4.5. Report of the results

The results of the observation are reported to the authorities and to the writers in November (see Appendix 2). Implications for improvement are also included.

The results of textbook analysis, classroom observation, and questionnaires to teachers and students will be reported to both the authorities and the writers. However, the way should be different. On the whole, the report to the authorities does not need to be specific. Rather they want to know more general results. For example, the total results of textbook analysis in Table 2 and 3 would be more useful with some comments such as general features of the textbook, to what extent the activities the writers proposed are adequate for and consistent with the methodology the writers claimed. After analyzing the data of all procedures, it is important to report how much the textbook should be revised.

On the other hand, the results of textbook analysis to the writers will include not only the same report as to the authorities but also detailed data will be important such as the framework of criteria and textbook analysis sheet with the results (see Appendix 1). One reason for that is they need the raw data rather than the general comments about the results in order to know where to improve. The writer might want to know common comments and additionally specific opinions from teachers and students. If they need the questionnaires themselves that have been filled in, it is possible to show them as long as private data is not disclosed.

5. Conclusion

The evaluation procedures and the results that I have presented in this study will be useful for the writers to improve the textbook. It is also important for the authorities to know to some extent the new textbook would be successful. Moreover, they can take consideration in the results when two more levels in the series are planned for the future. These can be more communicative and difficult than the first level is.

As I used several procedures to evaluate the textbook, it is necessary to analyze it from various viewpoints: for example, from a professional evaluator's viewpoint as is done in textbook analysis and classroom observation, teacher's and learner's point of view.

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