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Cultural education through the high school level English textbooks

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Abstract

It cannot be denied that intercultural understanding is crucial in the process of learning English at elementary school, junior high school, high school, and beyond. This paper analyzes the high school English textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan from the perspective of intercultural understanding. First, it elucidates the types of articles, the countries materials deal with, and the purposes of the materials used in the books. Then it considers important elements of intercultural education. The result of the research shows that the materials contain various kinds of categories, and many concern English-speaking countries. Furthermore, an important fact is that many materials concerning Japan, aimed at understanding its own culture, are shown in the textbooks as well. Finally, the paper suggests future direction for the use of materials in the textbooks in order to facilitate intercultural understanding.

Keywords

textbooks, English language, intercultural education

Introduction

In Japan, high school educational guidance has been revised for the first time in about ten years, and new textbooks based on the new government guidelines for teaching have been used since 2013. The instructional objective is described by the government guidelines as follows: to develop students' communication abilities to accurately understand and appropriately convey information, ideas, etc., deepening their understanding of language and culture, fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.

Based on the objectives, it is necessary to consider the elements and topics of culture shown in the textbooks. The Course of Study explains the curriculum design and treatment of the contents for each subject as follows: In order to cultivate communication abilities through the English language in a comprehensive manner, teaching materials that give sufficient consideration to actual language-use situations and functions of language should be used according to the objectives of each subject. Teachers should take up a variety of suitable materials in accordance with the level of students' development, as well as their interest, covering materials that relate to the daily lives, manners and customs, stories, geographies, history, traditional culture, natural sciences, etc., of Japanese people and the people of the world, focusing on the countries that use the English language. Special consideration should be given to the following perspectives:

- A. Materials that are useful in understanding various viewpoints and ways of thinking, developing the ability to make impartial judgments and cultivating a rich sensibility.
- B. Materials that are useful in deepening the understanding of the ways of life and cultures of Japan and foreign countries, raising interest in language and culture, and developing respectful attitudes toward these elements.
- C. Materials that are useful in deepening the international understanding from a broad perspective, heightening students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community, and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation.
- D. Materials that are useful in deepening individual thinking on humanity, society, nature, etc.

As for point A, I will examine how or to what extent materials in the textbooks deal with various ways of viewing and thinking. Considering B, a wide range of topics is needed for understanding the various ways of life and cultures of countries all over the world. The contents of the textbooks will be categorized. With regard to C, students need to understand their own culture as citizens living in a global society. Japan has been affected by Western culture for a long time, so many students do not seem to have a deep understanding of Japanese culture.

In this paper, based on these considerations, the materials were analyzed from the perspective of intercultural understanding, which has been defined along with the government guidelines for teaching. The top ten in sale of the English textbooks have been chosen for analysis from a viewpoint of cross-cultural understanding of the subject matter. This will make clear the characteristics of the contents treated in the textbooks.

Intercultural education

Intercultural understanding and its scope

The Ministry's guideline says that one of the purposes of English education is intercultural understanding. As mentioned before with regard to materials, teachers should take up a variety of suitable topics that deepen their intercultural understanding. However, activities of intercultural education, or education for international education, can be found in many other fields as well. It may be used as synonymous with the related phrase "education for international understanding," and is mixed up in many cases. Yoneda (1998) states that intercultural understanding can be taught in the context of education for international understanding. He explains that when Japan grew up economically in the 1970s, it became time to consider how to communicate with people in the world well. The cross-cultural understanding became the keyword of international education during the 1980s. Yoneda claims that the following two points are significant:

- [1] It must aim for symbiosis.
- [2] It is important to understand the relation between cross-cultural understanding and the understanding of one's own culture.

On the other hand, Ikeno (2000, p. 18) described the features of the education as follows, distinguishing it from "International understanding" education:

- [1] Cultivation of world citizen consciousness.
- [2] Cultivation of a tolerant attitude toward different cultures and the mind to respect those cultures.
- [3] Relativism of one's own culture and self.

The purpose of international education is to achieve three aims, while intercultural education emphasizes [2] and [3]. Furthermore, Ikeno (2000) states that the activity of intercultural education is classified into two

types, knowledge approach and experience approach. He states that as an example of knowledge approach, the cultural understanding through linguistic analysis is a unique activity in English education. As for the experience approach, Mizogami (2009, p. 41) claims that intercultural understanding means methodology of self-change and of acquiring the active value judgment power through new frameworks, and it is caught by neither prejudice nor common sense.

Considering the opinions given above, the concrete and the abstract culture are given as standards in this research. I will analyze the ten English textbooks that are currently used in high schools in Japan from the perspective of intercultural understanding.

The definition of 'Intercultural Education' in this research

Intercultural Education is defined as follows in this research: It gives students information concerning various cultures of the world through English, makes them aware of the varieties of cultures and respects not only the Japanese culture, but also other cultures, heightening students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community and cultivating a spirit of international cooperation. In this definition *cultures* refer to daily lives, manners and customs, stories, geographies, histories, the culture of the young, the environment, human rights, war and so on.

Previous studies

From previous studies about the subject matters shown in the English high school textbooks under the former government guidelines in Japan, the following tendencies can be found. First, many articles about everyday life are included in high-school English textbooks (Muroi, 1999; Muroi 2004; Yamanaka, 2004). According to Yamanaka (2004), as a result of investigating ten English textbooks used at high school and classifying the contents into cultural categories, it was said that about half of the lessons treated the contents about everyday life.

Second, many English-speaking countries, such as Britain and the United States, were treated in the lessons (Muroi, 1999; Muroi 2004; Yamanaka, 2004). For instance, Muroi (2004) researched top ten high-school English textbooks of the adoption rate and stated that 24 % of the textbooks included the countries of Inner Circle. Yamanaka (2006) analyzed nine junior-high school English textbooks (*Crown* 1-3, *New Horizon* 1-3, and *Sunshine* 1-3) and 10 English textbooks used in high schools, and stated that many of the subject articles and words concerning English-speaking countries, such as the United States, Britain, and Australia were included in those textbooks.

Thirdly, high-school English textbooks changed a lot as to the contents, vocabularies, and so on, compared with the English textbooks of junior high school (Yamada, 2004; Chujou et., 2007; Takeda et., 2007). For instance, it is indicated that the subject matter of a junior high school textbook was included in conversation form and there were few meaningful materials in Yamada (2004). Chujou, K., Yoshimori, T., Hasegawa, S., Nishigaki, C., & Yamazaki, A. (2007) investigated a total of 95 volumes of textbooks of English I, English II, and Reading (2007) used at high schools and reported that the number of different words was 9,903 and the number of total words was 607,407. The numbers were much bigger compared with the total number of 1,690 counted as different words and the number of 41,344 counted as words that appeared in six sorts of English textbooks of the junior high school.

Fourthly, the subject topics concerning global themes, such as environment and war, exist to some extent (Muroi, 1999; Shikano, 2001). Shikano (2001) chose 18 textbooks of English I and English II used at high-schools and stated that the lessons treating three global problems of environment, human rights, and war occupied about 20 % of all the 98 lessons.

Lastly, there were many subject matters about Japanese utterance and Japan (Muroi, 1999; Muroi, 2004; Yamanaka, 2006). Muroi (2004) researched top ten high-school English textbooks in sale of English I and English II, and reported that the lessons treating Japan occupied 22 % of the whole in English I and formed

17% of the whole in English II.

Research questions

The research task of this paper is to present clearly what kind of subject matters are seen in top ten in sale English high-school textbooks by investigating those textbooks based on the new course of guideline. The following are viewpoints of the analysis for the research task. Research questions include:

1. What kind of fields are treated in the cultural materials?
2. What kind of areas are treated in the materials?
3. What are the purposes of the materials treated in the new textbooks?
4. What is the rate of concrete culture and abstract culture in the cultural subject matters for intercultural understanding?

Method and procedure

The objects applicable to analysis in this research are top ten high-school English textbooks called Communication English I and approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Technology. They are currently used as mandatory subjects. The adoption ratio is the top 10 highest of 25 textbooks. The analysis units are "Lesson", "Chapter", and reading materials such as "For Reading" and "Reading."

The first research question regards the fields treated in the cultural materials. The contents of the cultural articles were classified into the following categories; (a) daily lives (a greeting, self-introduction, etc.), (b) school life (a lesson, conversation with a friend, etc.), (c) manners and customs (eating habits, a lifestyle, annual events etc.), (d) geography and history, (e) language and communication, (f) youth culture (anime, comics, etc.), (g) environment, (h) war, (i) natural science, (j) stories (an old tale, a novel, etc.), (k) human right, (l) biography.

The second research question is about the number and rate of the areas treated in the textbooks. The countries shown in the cultural materials are classified based on the division suggested by Kachru (1990). Kachru (1990) suggests three areas concerning the use of English. In his division, A is called Inner Circle, B is called Outer Circle, and C is called Expanding Circle. His division was adopted for the analysis of the second question. When one lesson includes two areas like A and B, it is counted as both points.

- (A) The countries in which English is used as a native language (Inner Circle and e.g. the United States, Britain, Australia, etc.)
- (B) The countries in which English is used as an official language (Outer Circle and e.g. Singapore, India, etc.)
- (C) The countries in which English is used as a foreign language (Expanding Circle and e.g. Japan, South Korea, China, Thailand, etc.)

The third research question is about the types of the purposes for intercultural understanding. The following four purposes are used for the analysis:

- (A) understanding other cultures
- (B) understanding one's own culture
- (C) global understanding, and
- (D) Comparison

The fourth research question is about the rate of concrete culture and abstract culture in the cultural materials. The concept shown in Ashikaga, T., Fukita, R., & Ikuta, Y. (2001) and Ikegami (2002) is applied in

this paper. The visible things such as building and festivals are classified as concrete culture. The invisible things such as a sense of values, human relations, and personal views are classified as abstract culture.

Results

Contents of the materials for intercultural understanding

Figure 1 shows the numbers of the twelve categories in ten textbooks.

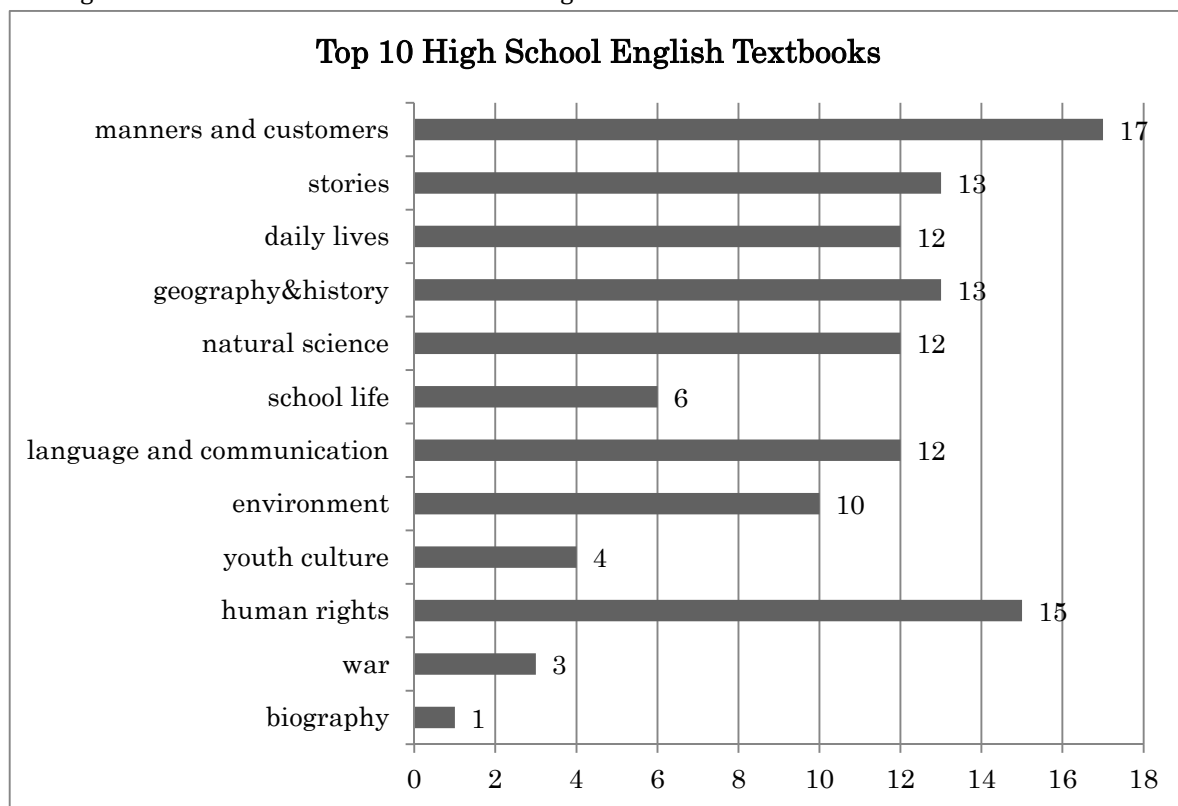


Figure 1: Categories of the cultural materials

As shown in Figure 1, there are many articles on human rights, manners and customs, daily lives, stories, and geography & history. There are few subject matters about youth culture, war, and biographies. Although various categories are treated, it seems that many subjects are easy to handle. It seems that the number of natural science increased compared with the number of the English textbooks used at junior high school. Therefore, students will get a wide scope of information through the textbooks.

Region of the materials

Figure 2 shows three regions, Japan, and unknown materials in total. When the material includes some information concerning two areas, they are both counted.

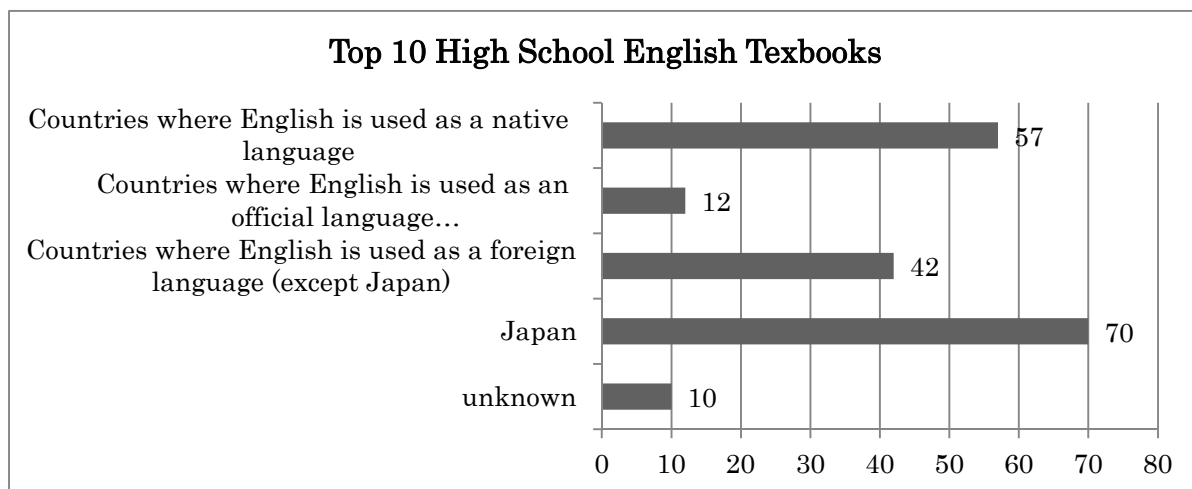


Figure 2: Areas treated in the cultural materials

As shown in Figure 2, the topics concerning the countries where English is used as the first language are treated very frequently. Japan also occupies many of the lessons in total. On the other hand, the number of the lessons concerning the countries where English is used as a second language is very small.

Purpose of the materials

Figure 3 shows the number of the four categories for the purposes of the materials. When one lesson seems to have two purposes, they are both counted.

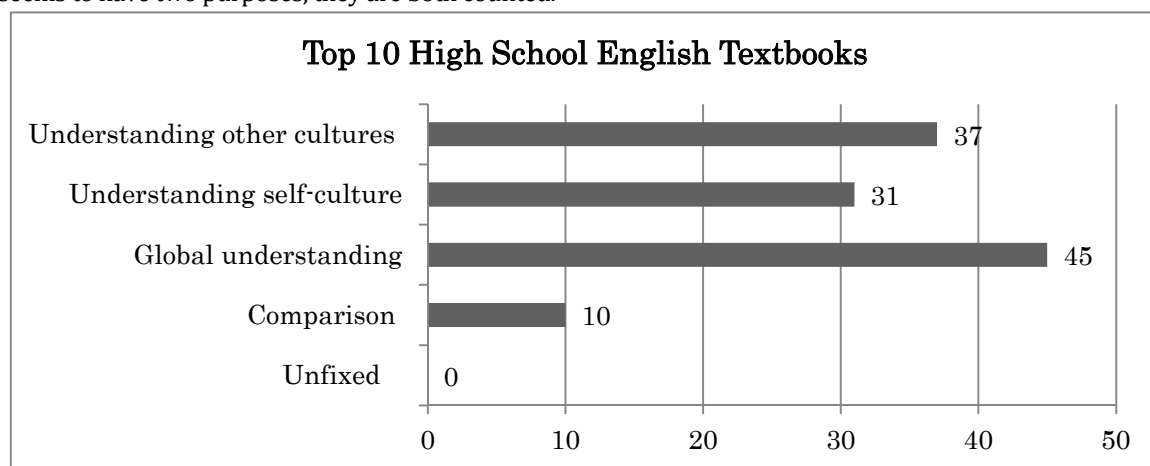


Figure 3: Purpose of the cultural materials

As shown in Figure 3, the number of global understanding is bigger than the other purposes. At the same time, the numbers of understanding other cultures and the source culture are big, while the number of comparison is so small. The materials for global understanding such as war, environment, and so on, are frequently treated in the high school textbooks in order to heighten students' awareness of being Japanese citizens living in a global community.

Comparison of Concrete Culture and Abstract Culture

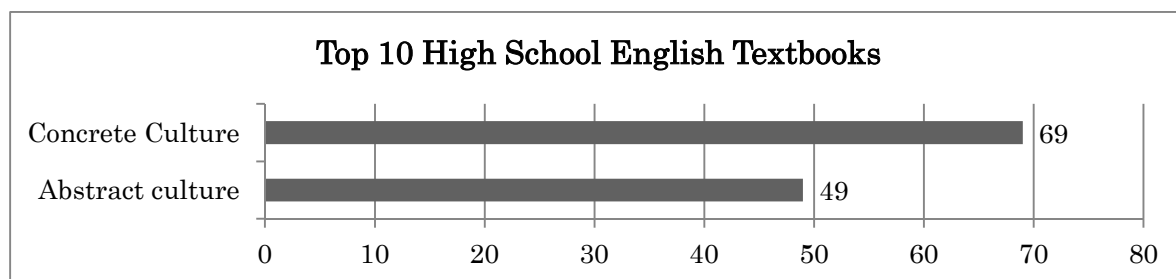


Figure 4: Comparison of concrete culture and abstract culture

Figure 4 shows the number of concrete culture and abstract culture references in the cultural materials for intercultural understanding included in high school level textbooks. The number of the abstract culture references is not big, but the materials of abstract culture are treated more frequently than in junior high schools. It is a good tendency that high school students have some chances to learn values that are different from their own.

Discussion

Based on the data, I will summarize the materials for intercultural understanding in the high school textbooks. First, all the lessons in the textbooks deal with some elements which are presented as concrete culture or abstract culture for intercultural understanding, and the categories of these are shown in various fields from the daily lives to customs and manners, history & geography, traditional cultures, environment, war, and so on. This trend clearly reflects the Ministry's guideline. Therefore, teachers have great possibilities of teaching the cultural issues. They should explain the values or the ways of thinking behind the behaviors relating to themes in the textbooks or make students ask ALT teachers about the cultural articles because increasing humanity is also important in intercultural education.

Secondly, most of the regions in the materials for intercultural understanding are the countries where English is used as the first language, and few lessons concerning the countries where English is used as the second language are treated. The contents of the articles are taught in the subject of English, so it is natural that the textbooks use many topics related to the countries where English is used as a mother language. However, English is established as an international language, so it is desirable to increase the topics of the countries where it is used as a foreign language and make students aware of the fact that English is the international language especially because it is used in many more countries as a foreign language than as the first language. This point is discussed in Kamiya (2008). He suggests English Education in terms of World English and insists that English should be emphasized as the international language, not as American English. Moreover, more countries that have close relationship with Japan, such as Korea, China, and so on, should be treated, as Yamanaka (2006) indicates, because the students who are Japanese will probably communicate with those people in the future.

Thirdly, the purposes of global understanding and understanding other cultures are emphasized more than other purposes. This reflects the objective of deepening students' understanding of language and culture described in the Ministry's guideline. It will be interesting for high school learners to get a knowledge of foreign issues other than Japan. However, teachers should not only give students a piece of information, but also suggest materials relating to the information in details and effectively.

Finally, it might be possible to design some ideas for the deepening of students' understanding. As an example, local materials will be preferred in order to deepen students' understanding of the Japanese culture.

One success is reported in Yoshida (2006). He and his team designed the materials of history, characters, public entertainments, and so on in Irima Area in Saitama Prefecture, managing to provide students with a deeper understanding of Japanese culture.

Conclusion

The research has shown that various kinds of topics suitable for high school students are presented in the English textbooks as a good balance of abstract culture and concrete culture. This characteristic can be said to be preferred because it follows the Ministry's guideline. However, one point needs to be changed. There are still biases because too much is focused on nations in Inner Circle. There is a marked lack of focus on nations in the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle except Japan in comparison to the nations in the Inner Circle. According to the government's "white paper on tourism" (2013), the travelers who come to Japan have been increasing in number recently, reaching the total of 10,360,000 foreign travelers visiting Japan in 2013. This has exceeded 2010, which had been the highest until then. The rate has increased by 24% compared with the previous year. According to the report, foreign travelers visiting Japan come mainly from China, South Korea and Taiwan. Canada and Australia indicate only several percent of the visiting foreigners. Thus, it would be beneficial for high school students to learn a variety of cultures concerning those countries because there is a great possibility that they will meet people from those countries in the future.

It is hoped that this research has been successful in offering some insights into the teaching of culture in English textbooks, making clear some characteristics shown in the high school textbooks. It is very important for teachers to recognize the tendencies when engaged in the process of teaching of culture. It is hoped that this information will be useful for teachers when they are engaged in teaching English in their classroom.

However, as can be pointed to in Yamanaka (2004) and Yamanaka (2006), there are no detailed instructions in the Ministry of Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology as regards region, purpose, and so on. Although teachers are required to take up appropriate topics of various countries throughout the world, there is no specific information which would be useful in choosing countries and categories. It can be confusing to decide about the topics or make plans for cultural understanding, especially because culture has a multiplicity of meanings. It would be better to have clear instructions on the teaching of cultures in these courses.

Finally, some limitations in this study should be noted. English textbooks are not the only way of teaching culture in classes. It is possible for students to learn the cultural issues in other ways. For instance, students can learn culture from ALT teachers or in general studies. However, it is true that the contents of the textbooks can have a great effect on the stage of cultural learning. Further discussions are preferred.

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Textbooks

All Abroad! Communication English I (Tokyo shoseki)
VISTA English Communication I (Sanseido)
CROWN English Communication I (Sanseido)
MY WAY Communication I (Sanseido)
COMET English Communication I (Suken shuppan)
Vivid English Communication I (Daiichi gakushusha)
ELEMENT Communication English I (Keirinkan)
Power On Communication English I (Tokyo shoseki)
Landmark English Communication I (Keirinkan)
BIG DIPPER English Communication I (Suken shuppan)

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