

WHICH ONE? ANALYSIS OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE TEXTBOOKS: INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES

どちらですか。日本語の教科書の分析：教師の意見

Toni Collette, Carleton University
トニー・コレット、カールトン大学

1. INTRODUCTION

In the Japanese language classroom, Japanese textbook are commonly seen and used. Oftentimes, the new Japanese instructor will be given a textbook to teach from without much choice. Unlike other languages, Japanese does not necessarily have an international standard for teacher qualification for a teaching position; unlike TESL, for example, that is quite standardized. With more students enrolling in Japanese language classes in university, there is a question as to whether textbooks used in the classroom are optimal. This was the basis of the original research. The overarching research question was: do the materials developed for the teaching of Japanese to foreign students embody Processability Theory's five stages of language acquisition, specifically in regards to grammatical structures? The aim was to improve the instruction of Japanese to Canadian, and ultimately international, students. The focus of the present study, a part of this overarching research question, was how the instructors perceived the textbooks, and what did they think of the grammar presented in the textbooks. Four instructors were interviewed, and answered a questionnaire regarding grammar presentation and progression, and how would they like to see grammar in textbooks.

2. DISCUSSION

Two theories were used to inform the research: materials development and processability theory. Material development research generally has an underlying paradigm or theory that helps to see how materials can be potentially developed (Tomlinson & Matsuhara, 2010). The understanding of textbook here is that of the 'traditional textbook', all those that can be purchased from a publishing company, such as *genki*, Japanese for Busy People, *minna no nihongo*. However, even if an instructor decides to create their own handouts, it will necessarily follow a predetermined sequence of grammatical progression, and will be ordered in a specific way. Material development looks at the utility of a textbook as seen by its users, students or instructors. It looks at how writers write their textbooks. An idea behind material development is that teacher flexibility is a component that cannot be ignored; instructors will adapt the material to their own teaching style, their situation, or to the goals of the students or administration (Tomlinson & Matsuhara, 2010).

As for processability theory, Pienemann identified five different stages of progression of grammar. This theory follows the basis that there is a developmental trajectory to grammar learning (Pienemann, 2015), and that one stage needs to be mastered to be able to continue to the following stage. As shown in the following table, following the foundations from Kawaguchi (2000), the first stage is simple formulaic sequences and simple copula sentences that can be formulated by the student. In the second stage, the lexical procedure stage, students can make verb inflections like the past

or the negative of verbs, and follow the correct word order (for Japanese S-O-V). Stage three, the phrasal procedure, students can make longer sentences, use connectors such as “and” (~te form of verbs to connect small sentence together), and learn more verbal inflections (dictionary form). In the fourth stage, sentence procedure, passive and conditional sentences are introduced to the students as sentences become more complex, and that there is effort in agreement between verbs and participants in a sentence (for example, ~nagara “while” constructions. The final stage, subordinate clause procedure, there is more emphasis on the exchange of information across clauses, and the main example of this stage in Japanese is the wa-ga distinction.

Table 1. Japanese examples of where grammatical structures appear in the progression.

Stage	Examples
1	finite form of the non-past polite form of verbs ～です。
2	canonical order SOV adding <i>ka</i> to form a questions (食べますか) changing the verb tenses
3	V-te V topicalisation the negative <i>-nai</i> dictionary form of verbs
4	passive constructions ～ながら particles (“while”) “if” constructions
5	は・が

What are instructors looking for in the textbooks they use? A general theme that emerged was that instructors wanted something concise, and topics should be clustered together, more so than how they are currently presented in textbooks. Having many examples along the grammar presentation was also seen as important and of great value to students. Verbs should also be presented in dictionary form from the start. They expressed that certain students cannot find the verbs in the dictionary, since in the dictionary they are only listed in their short form, and not under the ~masu form.

Particles were also identified as source of difficulty for students; however, particles were outside the scope of this study. Another issue was that of cultural sensitivity; one interviewee mentioned that they would prefer see only traditional Japanese examples and situations instead of talking about Christmas and Valentine's Day in Japanese. Of the textbooks the instructors had used, *minna no nihongo* seemed to be a favourite, and *genki* coming in at second place. Additionally, if it were at all possible, writing their own seemed to be the optimal solution, if there was enough time and funding for such an endeavour.

Out of the textbooks used by the interviewees, *genki* and Japanese for Busy People (JBP) were the predominant ones. A comparison was made between the two. For *genki*, the interviewees liked the fact that it had additional online resources that they could use within the classroom, the explanation were better than those of JBP, and that keigo was presented at the right time. Some likes for JBP was that it had a good flow in the material, and that the grammar taught could be used immediately by the students in meaningful interactions.

However, there were some aspects that the interviewees did not like. For *genki*, interviewees mentioned that there were many technical terms (such as noun, predicate, clause), and certain students did not know these terms, unless they were studying in linguistics. They also mentioned that foreign students, such as Chinese students studying in Canada, understood these words easily because that is how they learned English. Canadian students possibly last used these terms in high school, if they were taught them at all. Another complaint about *genki* was that the content was spread throughout the two textbooks. Interviewees mentioned that they would like to see topics more consistently presented and at a closer interval. For example, the conditional *~ba* is taught in unit 22, many units after the certain construction are taught, such as *~ba yokatta* (unit 18), and *~nakereba narimasen* (unit 12). One interviewee mentioned also that the presentation of the negative form of adjectives is not as polite as that taught in JBP. In *genki*, the negative form of adjectives is *~ja nai desu*, a slightly less polite version of JBP's *~ja arimasen*.

As for JBP, interviewees mentioned that it was not a great textbook for university students, not aligning itself to a university student's reality. Originally, the JBP textbook was chosen because the Japanese classes were offered as part of continuing education, which would have consisted of an older professional student, most likely geared towards business, and doing business in Japan. Interviewees mentioned that today, their demographics generally include students who are interested in anime, manga, and Japanese music. The dislike was also because there did not seem to be many changes to the textbook. One interviewee mentioned that an older version of the textbook was better than the current one of JBP. There may be an issue here that the program has not allowed much change during the last few years to reflect the change in the type of student that is currently taking the classes.

Another dislike was the order in which verbs are presented. JBP first introduces the copula *desu*, then *arimasu* and *imasu*, followed by the other verbs. The interviewees that work with this textbook have rearranged the progression so students can talk about themselves and what they do more rapidly. They have ordered the verb progression as follows: first, *desu*, then movement verbs (*ikimasu*, *kimasu*, *kaerimasu*), then verbs

(tabemasu, nominasu, for example), and to finish with arimasu and imasu. They felt that this was a better way to help students communicate immediately.

Interviewees were also asked about how grammar instruction, and which units of the textbooks, would fit in with the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. Although they would encourage students who want to take the test to go for the examination, most interviewees said that their primary goal in teaching was to enable students to communicate with Japanese individuals.

3. CONCLUSION

Even if these findings and comparisons of opinions of textbooks are pertinent, there are still administrative constraints in the choosing of a textbook. While *minna no nihongo* and *genki* seem to be the preferred textbooks, costs and program size might be most influential in choosing the textbook than textbook efficacy. Other than administrative constraints, how can this study help instructor of Japanese today? Recall that material development theory takes into account teacher creativity. This can help instructors make the material more accessible to students, and help them to anticipate how the progression of grammatical structures fit into one another, and see if they need to adapt some parts of the explanation, or add additional information to a grammar explanation. We learn what something is by what it is not; the same could be true of the function and meaning of certain grammar points, such as the four different ways to make conditional sentences (to, ~ba, ~tara, ~nara). Also, it could help instructors to find an order they feel best helps to promote communication among students and their Japanese friends.

From this cursory small study, there is room for further research on the instruction of Japanese. First, it is important to remember that many students have previous knowledge of Japanese before they step into the classroom; some students may watch anime and read subtitles, or they may listen to J-pop music, or at the very least, they know names of car brands or popular Japanese food, like sushi and tempura. It might be beneficial for instructors to harness this previous knowledge for instruction, since it may create in some students a meaningful connection with something that they already know, and to a situational context (creating meaning in context).

Another interesting study would be to ask students for their opinions of the textbook that they are using, and what they would like to see. This could inform material developers to tailor a textbook that matches both the instructor's and the student's needs. Since many of the instructors are Japanese individuals, they may not comprehend where students are coming from in their learning. A student would be better apt at saying what they would like to have known when certain grammatical explanations were presented.

And although this study focus primarily on grammar and grammatical structures, it may be pertinent to see if this study could be replicated with particle instruction. And if it can be applied to particle instruction, how can that inform grammar instruction, since particles are crucial in creating meaningful sentences.

Finally, this study looked at major textbooks that have been created and used in classrooms since the late nineteen eighties and early nineteen ninety. The foundation, and the theories that informed their creation, have changed over time. More theories have appeared, and there has been more research conducted in second language acquisition.

The question now would be: is it worth to stick with these textbooks and try to improve them or should we simply start afresh with the knowledge of the newer theories?

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