

〈 論文 〉

Evaluation of English Language Teaching resources for Japanese students at home and abroad

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Abstract

Japanese students that go abroad to pursue university studies require proficiency in English language to succeed academically. The goal of this paper is to examine how the selected course books address cultural elements with a focus on reading comprehension, writing and critical thinking strategies. Results showed that cultural understanding is addressed in the course books, and students can make connections between their own culture and English culture. Using an Evaluation Checklist, the study is based on the analysis of English course books used in Japan and Canada for Japanese students. With some recommended modifications, the examined course books were found to support reading comprehension through communication activities and strategies.

Key words: ESL, cultural understanding, course book, materials evaluation

1. Introduction

Japanese students require proficiency in English language to succeed academically abroad, and at home as part of their university requirements for graduation. At the same time, each year an increasing number of Japanese companies require that their employees have English proficiency. English course books constitute the important factor in achieving this proficiency. A general tendency is to use global course books which reflect only western values with little attention to Confucian ones (Carson, 1992; Reimann, 2009). Therefore, the goal of this study is to determine how the course book supports the development of linguistic and intercultural competencies of the Japanese students in English to compete in the international world.

2. Literature Review

Materials evaluation is needed in order to achieve the above mentioned goal of the study. Evaluation of a curriculum is defined as “the systematic and strategic collection of information, the analysis and report of details for decision making purposes. It is a systematic process and it measures what is important to measure having the available resources” (Nunan & Lamb, 1996, p. 230). The *Materials* component of a curriculum encompasses the design and evaluation of

all teaching aids that teachers use in the class including textbooks which are the basic teaching materials used in language classes (Brown, 1995).

3. Research Rationale

Although English as a global language and intercultural communication are popular terms, there is still a dearth in incorporating cultural content in ELT course books. The cultural content is often limited to titles of the chapters and tourist information in the form of short readings.

Regarding study abroad, it is important to note that Japanese students usually participate in what is called short-term language immersion programs and active learning programs. Active Learning Programs have the concept of “hands-on-learning”. The main objective is to encourage students to put their knowledge into practice. Students can apply what they learn in their home university when they go to these programs. Students are strongly encouraged to take part at least in one program during their four years at the university. This allows them to be equipped with the specialized knowledge to work in today’s international and globalized society. It is important for them to receive a good preparation in English through the standard classes and use the best materials possible at the home university.

4. Study and Objectives

Our focus is to evaluate English course books focusing on reading skills. The objective is to determine how effective they are in improving English skills and cultural understanding of Japanese students in and outside Japan. This study specifically examines suitability (matching the course book against the context of teaching and specific requirements like culture aspects) to answer the major question: “Would it be good for my group of students?” (Cunningsworth, 1995, p. 15).

We evaluate two course books, *Interactions 2 Reading*, which is used in Japan and *Quest 2: Reading and Writing*, which is used in Canada to teach English to international students. Thus, the purpose of this research study is twofold. The first objective is to examine how these two course books address cultural understanding. The second objective is to examine how they address reading comprehension, writing and critical thinking strategies in the process of learning English. These components are key aspects in being able for Japanese students to communicate effectively abroad. The course books are analysed following *Course Book Evaluation: a Global Checklist*.

The checklist used in this evaluation project is composed of 47 questions. The answers available are restricted to *yes/no/I do not know* options, plus extra *comments and remarks*. The checklist criteria for evaluation is as follows: Rationale, Assumptions, Availability, Context and user description, Objectives and scope, Implementation, Content and coverage, Practicality, layout and organization, Illustration, Linkage, Educational validity, Culture education, Standard requirements and assessment, Appropriateness, Innovation, Sufficiency, Learner support, Flexibility and Teacher support. These criteria have been derived from the literature on this field (Hutchinson & Waters,

1987; White, 1988; Brown, 1989; Weir & Roberts 1994; Cunningsworth, 1995; Tanner & Green, 1998; Richards, 2001; Seliger & Shohamy, 2001; Byrd, 2001; Komorowska, 2005); and completed with questions drawn from the author's individual experience of materials design, implementation and evaluation (Stec, 2007).

5. The materials: Course books

Both course books are used with Japanese students. Japanese students must complete their degree in Business Studies, and acquire high proficiency level in the English language before going to study in Canada. This section includes a brief description of the structure and content offered in the materials.

Interactions 2 Reading (Hartmann & Kirn, 2007) consists of ten chapters which focus on the following topics: Education and student life, City life, Business and Money, Jobs and professions, Lifestyles around the world, Global Connections, Language and communication, Tastes and preferences, New frontiers, Ceremonies respectively. Each chapter covers nine sections for study: The section "In this chapter" entails of brief warm-up questions about the topic of the reading and a brief summary of the chapter. "Connecting to the topic" consists of warm up questions about a given picture that relates to the reading topic. "Activating prior knowledge" presents pre-reading activities such as previewing the topic, the vocabulary and getting meaning from context in order to place the reading in context and allow the student to read actively. "Reading the article" presents the reading text.

The articles have been taken from a variety of sources, such as magazine articles, textbook passages, essays and website articles which explore interesting current topics. "After you read" consists of questions aimed at identifying the main idea of the text, understanding the reading structure and checking the students' vocabulary. "Responding in writing" aims to cultivate critical thinking, organizing information, summarizing and writing their own ideas. "Talk it over" aims to understand the language and use the vocabulary in speaking. "Building vocabulary and Study Skills" focuses on vocabulary building through matching words and meaning, synonyms and antonyms, understanding connotations and filling in the blanks with the new words. Finally, there is "Focus on Testing" with strategies and activities for the TOEFL IBT building test taking skills (Hartmann & Kirn, 2007).

Quest 2 Reading and Writing (Hartman, 2007) consists of four units with two chapters in each unit, and a vocabulary workshop at the end. The units focus on Business, Art, Psychology and Health. The unit on Business includes such chapters as Doing Business Internationally and the Global Economy. The unit on Art includes the following chapters: Themes and Purposes and the Ancient World: Egypt. The unit on Psychology includes the chapters: States of Consciousness and Abnormal Psychology. The unit on Health includes such chapters as Medicine and Drugs: Addictive Substances and the Mind-Body Relationship. All of these units try to promote cultural

understanding by the selection of texts and visuals.

Each chapter of *Quest 2 Reading and Writing* contains five parts that blend reading and writing skills in the context of a particular academic area of study. Readings and activities are built upon one another and increase in difficulty as students work through the five sections of each chapter. The five parts are Introduction; General Interest Reading; Academic Reading; the Mechanics of Writing; Academic Writing. Parts one, two and three include before- reading, while-reading and after-reading activities. In the before-reading section, students are introduced to the topic chapter through visuals and vocabulary activities, followed by discussion activities to prepare them for reading. High interest reading sections capture the students' interests and provide opportunities for reading comprehension and cultural understanding. In the 'after-reading' section, strategies are employed to check understanding, followed by skimming for main ideas, using the dictionary and activities to give students opportunities to use academic skills.

"Mechanics of Writing" focuses on specific writing skills, grammar, vocabulary and punctuation, preparing them for the last section. Academic Writing is a step-by-step model of the writing process which includes brainstorming, narrowing the topic, writing topic sentences, planning the writing, and developing ideas into a paragraph. Writing assignments focus on a variety of rhetorical styles: chronological, description, analysis, persuasive and process. Written assignments require that students use the writing mechanics taught. Throughout the process, students are using critical thinking strategies including: thinking ahead; making inferences; synthesizing and applying information; using graphic organizers and charts; comparing and contrasting works of art; determining points of view; identifying causes and effects; finding evidence; having questions in mind; using a T-Chart to analyze advantages and disadvantages; predicting opposing arguments; understanding metaphors; and seeing two sides of an issue.

6. Findings and discussion

Having completed the general description of the materials, we explain the results according to the checklist criteria identifying which points best support English education among Japanese students.

Rationale, Assumptions, Availability

The rationale relates to the purpose of course books and their level of foreign language. The purpose of the course book is clearly indicated in the title: Reading and Writing. The level of the foreign language is indicated in the introduction to the text. In *Quest 2 Reading and Writing*, the series features two complementary strands: Reading and Writing, Listening and Speaking. In this project only the Reading and Writing component is being evaluated. *Quest 2 Reading and Writing* focuses on various areas of study including sociology, biology, business, psychology, art history, anthropology, literature and economics. Both course books state the author's name and rights.

In the case of *Interactions 2 Reading*, it is used for Upper Intermediate English Reading classes for Japanese students. The title of the book clearly states that it is focused on the development of reading skills. Each chapter contains activities to practice vocabulary and speaking skills. Specifically, this Interactions/Mosaic Silver Edition states that it focuses on “Best Practices, principles that contribute to excellent language teaching and learning” (Hartmann & Kirn, 2007, p. vii). These interconnected “Best Practices” are explained through the acrostic of the letters in the word *MOSAIC*: **M**aking use of academic content, **O**rganizing information, **S**caffolding instruction, **A**ctivating prior knowledge, **I**nteracting with others and **C**ultivating critical thinking (p. vii).

Assumptions relate to the educational theories and pedagogical concepts stated in the selected course books, which are clearly stated in the introduction of both course books in an organizational chart. These are broken down into strategies: reading, writing and mechanics of writing, critical thinking strategies and test-taking strategies (Hartman, 2007, p. viii-xiii; Hartmann & Kirn, 2007, p. xii). These are grouped according to a unit and chapter, as explained in the Resource section earlier; and linked to the course content. Details are given on how these are introduced, by elaborating on specific activities. In *Interactions 2 Reading*, the organizational chart appears under a section entitled “Scope and Sequence”. It is divided into chapter title and picture, reading selections, reading skills and strategies, critical thinking skills, vocabulary building, language skills and focus on testing with question types for TOEFL IBT (Hartmann & Kirn, 2007, p. xii)

Availability relates to the relative easiness of getting the course book and its guide, plus the availability of other teaching materials recommended. *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* course book is readily available via the Internet. In the introduction, other teaching materials are identified and described. These include: Teacher’s editions, video program featuring lectures and social language development, an audio program and a test generator. *Interactions 2 Reading* student book and CD are available at the university’s store for purchase.

Context, Objectives, Implementation

Context relates to the description of the target language group such as the degree of knowledge and skills assumed of them plus teachers’ qualifications and experience necessary for the course book implementation. In the introduction the text indicates that this resource, *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* parallels and accelerates the process native-speaking students go through. “By previewing typical college course material, *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* helps student get ‘up to speed’ in terms of both academic content and language skills” (Hartman, 2007, p. 8). There is not any discussion of teachers’ qualifications and experience necessary for the course book implementation.

Interactions 2 Reading does not describe clearly the target learners. However, the university has adapted it to a corresponding level in its language curriculum - upper intermediate English classes. Thus, the book is used for teaching Japanese students heading for this level.

Objectives and scope relate to the description of the general learning and detailed objectives.

Extra objectives refer to those suggested in the curriculum or syllabus that differentiate the course book from others. The learning objectives and detailed objectives of teaching English are clearly defined in *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* while *Interactions 2 Reading* does not define clearly the detailed objectives of teaching English in the course. This aspect has been evaluated through the course objectives stated in the syllabus. For the upper intermediate English Reading and vocabulary objectives, the university syllabus states that students should be able to “understand lecture course texts of up to 1 page in length by increasing reading fluency and accuracy; and build their vocabulary to help them understand academic texts more easily” (online syllabus). These objectives correspond to the activities in the course book.

Implementation refers here to the essential conditions and facilities suggested for the course book implementation. The course book informs the teachers clearly of the essential conditions required for the implementation. It is completed through the use of visuals, samples of strategy-based approaches, and graphics of high interest reading selections, transition from general interest reading to academic content, discussion and pair-work, group-work activities, and unit ending vocabulary workshops.

Content, Coverage, Practicality

Content and coverage relate to the teaching content and topics included in the course book; extra content with a reference to what is articulated in the curriculum (or syllabus); the width, the depth and interest of the content; integration of the course book content with the content of other subjects. The course books content is integrated with skills such as writing and speaking, including vocabulary and grammar practice (Hartmann & Kim, 2007).

The content in both course books is wide and interesting to the learners. The first two chapters of *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* specifically deal with the issues linked with Business. Given that Japanese students are Business students, these areas capture their interest. For example Chapter one, “Doing Business Internationally”, the sub-topics include: International Business Markets; International Culture around Business issues; Improving CQ: Understanding Cultural Values. In chapter two, The Global Economy, the sub-topics include: the Exchange of Material Goods; excerpt from Lawrence Durrell’s *Bitter Lemons*; and Economic Systems.

The content is linked with Business, Culture, Art, History, Anthropology, Psychology, Health, and Medicine. There are some topics with a straight comparison between Japan and other countries, such as Chapter 2 in *Interactions 2 Reading*, which deals with educational systems in different countries. Other topics relate to Business and Money, Jobs and Professions, Lifestyles Around the World, Global Connections, Language and Communication, Tastes and Preferences. The majority of the topics emphasize cultural understanding and diversity. All the topics seem to be suitable for the Japanese learners, who prepare linguistically and contextually for their study abroad, for example in Canada.

Practicality relates to procedures, methods, techniques and tasks identified for the course book implementation. The course books indicate the procedures through strategies of reading, writing (in the case of *Quest 2: Reading and Writing*), mechanics of writing, critical thinking, speaking (in the case of *Interactions 2 Reading*), and test taking. Varieties of tasks are listed in the opening pages and are applied throughout the book. These include tasks for reading comprehension, writing processes and the development of vocabulary and expressions, learning and applying grammar skills, as well as other ways of representing through graphic organizers, charts and visuals.

Organization, Illustration, Linkage

Layout and organization relate to the practicality of the course book in terms of its sections and topics designed for English course. The course is organized in a very practical manner. There are several sections, which are repeated in the process of learning in the course books. In the case of *Quest 2: Reading and Writing*, these include: “Think ahead”; discussion questions; deal with new words; guess meaning from context; finding main idea; finding details; making connections; extension: questions on culture; using graphic organizers; using Venn diagrams and charts; analysis of text; application; discussion; responsive writing; use of grammar to construct an essay; write an essay. In the case of *Interactions 2 Reading*, a pre-reading chart with discussion questions is included in each chapter. There are blank tables to fill with corresponding vocabulary, comic strips related to the chapter topic as well as graphic organizers using Venn diagrams.

Visual aids relate to the visual presentation of the content: illustrations, diagrams, tables and drawings. In the before reading and during reading stages, numerous illustrations are presented to ensure students’ comprehension. Diagrams, tables and drawings offer clarity in tasks. They provide students with other ways of representation in their responses to the questions and assignments. All visuals in both course books are presented in full colour. There is a diversity of culture, race and age throughout the topics. There is a good balance of gender as the readings mention the roles of both men and women in a society. For example, the main text on Chapter 3 of *Interactions 2 Reading* is on “Banking on Poor Women” and global fund for women.

Linkage relates to the internal coherence of the course book as well as the cohesion of modules and sections. The units make coherent sense internally. They all focus on the common goal of reading comprehension and cultural understanding in both *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* and *Interactions 2 Reading*. All the activities and tasks are connected with a variety of content areas to move forward this joint purpose. Both course books have a good variety of topics.

Each chapter of *Interactions 2 Reading* contains four main parts. Part one offers a main text followed by questions for comprehension and discussion. Part two has several shorter texts on topics similar to the main topic of the chapter. These texts are followed by exercises for students to find the “Topic sentence” and “Main idea”. This allows students to establish comparison between the texts. Students can also compare with their own culture. In the case of Japanese students who

will study in Canada, the course provides cultural preparation mainly through the readings. Part three consists of exercises on vocabulary, “fill in the blanks”, matching meaning, and answering some questions from the texts. Part four consists of exercises for TOEFL IBT and a “Self-Assessment Log”.

Educational Validity and Culture

Educational validity relates to the most essential teaching materials and patterns recommended for communication in a language classroom. In a second language teaching classroom, students must complete basic learning outcomes: speaking and listening; reading and viewing; writing and other ways of representing; understanding of alternate cultures. These course books use essential teaching materials and patterns of classroom language communication to address all of these outcomes.

Educational culture relates here to the culture advocated and presented in the materials. The culture advocated includes issues of origin, age, class, values, relations, customs and gender patterns. English culture is addressed in several areas in the course book and cultures of several countries from around the world are included. In chapter one of *Interactions 2 Reading*, culture is defined in the text under sub-topics of Language, Religion, Values and Attitudes, Customs and Manners, Material culture. Reading activities and applications through graphic organizers and charts are provided for students so that students can have more thorough understanding of English culture and cultural values. Social relationships are depicted realistically and female and male participation is balanced. New and old mainstream customs plus alternate customs are included, in particular in the chapters on the Global Economy, Art history, Psychology and Health.

Standard Requirements and Assessment

Standard requirements relate to the level of learners’ achievement and skills; the procedures for the assessment and other procedures applied in gathering information about learners’ progress. *Quest 2 Reading and Writing* does not define learners’ standard level of achievement or required skills. The rules of assessment are not suggested for the users. The one form of assessment is that of test-taking strategies are found at the end of each chapter, for checking the learners’ progress.

Interactions 2 Reading contains a comprehensive set of questions at the end of each chapter in order to test the student on the content of each lesson. Furthermore, as part of learner support, each chapter has a “Self-Assessment Log”. In this section, students are provided with a list of strategies and vocabulary. From this list, they are asked to check the ones they learned in the chapter. Then they have to look through the chapter or ask the teacher about the strategies and words they do not understand.

Quest 2 Reading and Writing has a comprehensive set of exercises at the end of each unit to assess for vocabulary knowledge and acquisition from the unit. The activities include matching

words and definitions; true or false statements; selecting the correct word activity; vocabulary expansion; and selecting the correct word to complete sentences with content from the unit. Through the completion of these activities, students have the opportunity to determine what they have learned, and the new vocabulary which they need to continue to work on. There is no self-assessment at the end of the units.

Relevancy, Innovations, Sufficiency

Relevancy and appropriateness relate to the teaching materials design, the amount and relevance to the modern methodology of teaching second or alternate foreign languages. It evaluates the relation between the recommended teaching material and the conceptual level of learners. The teaching material is substantial enough for this type of second or alternate language learning. It is relevant to modern methodology of teaching languages. The emphasis is on communication; ensuring that the students can communicate orally, visually and in written form, using the proper mechanics for writing and “taking into consideration the impact of culture” (Horwitz, 2013, p. 61). The teaching material presented in the course books is right for the conceptual level of Japanese students. These students have studied Business and need the skills to communicate in English in the business world as well as in the social context. The content in the books provides the foundation for achieving the skills.

Innovations relate to the originality of objectives, content, procedures and methods recommended in the course books in comparison with the methods already known in foreign language teaching. Sufficiency relates to the necessity to prepare extra topics or other teaching materials for the course book implementation. The course books are very thorough. There will be no need to prepare extra topics, or other teaching materials for the course books implementation.

Teacher/ Learner Support, Flexibility

Teacher support relates to extra elements that may support teacher development or creativity. “The Quest Teacher’s Edition provides instructors with activity teaching suggestions, cultural and background notes, Internet links to more information on the unit themes, expansion black-line master activities, chapter tests, and a complete answer key” (Hartmann, 2007, p. vii). The Test Generator allows teachers to create customized tests in a matter of minutes.

Learner support relates to the broader educational issues such as learning strategies and learning devices; the support in the development of learner autonomy. The course books consider broader educational issues as the learning devices and support the learners’ autonomous language learning. Namely, it can be accomplished by the video program on DVD, which incorporate authentic classroom lectures with social vignettes, through lectures and social language. The lecture portion features college and university professors delivering high-interest mini lectures on a variety of topics. The students listen to the lectures and model accurate note taking. The social

language section gives students the chance to hear authentic conversations on a variety of topics. It is designed to help English language students to join study groups, interact with university teachers and make friends. An Audio CD program allows students to hear new vocabulary words, listen for intonation cues and increase their reading speed.

Flexibility relates to the course book modification, adapting to the local conditions: the instructions designed for the longer or shorter course time. There is not any indication that the course books could be modified in terms of the local – Asian or Canadian conditions. The course books do not have instructions for the longer/shorter courses.

7. Conclusions and Implications

The course books examined in this study support reading comprehension through several communication activities and strategies including reading, writing, critical thinking, test taking and the mechanics of writing.

Cultural understanding is addressed and supported mainly throughout the reading texts. Students can make connections to their own culture and alternate culture in every step of the learning process. They can bring their own experiences through cultural connections to support their individual English language learning through different topics, such as Business, Culture, Art, History, Anthropology, Psychology, Health, and Medicine, compare with lifestyles Around the World, Global Connections, Language and Communication.

Sections which require modification and improvements in these course books are linked with the Standard Requirements and Assessment practices. They need to be improved to reflect the variety of approaches in present day English language learning processes. Another aspect which was not specified in these course books refers to the qualifications and experience required by teachers for the implementation of the course books. The course books do not have instructions for the longer/shorter course time. Generally, they provide the good resource to improve proficiency in the English language for Japanese students.

From the evaluation that has been conducted to course books *Quest 2: Reading and Writing* and *Interactions 2 Reading* in this paper, the following specific points have been concluded:

- the evaluation checklist criteria used for this study is flexible and it can be used in other contexts and for other language teaching materials;
- cultural awareness should be supported and developed not only in the readings; the course books should include other activities linked with comparisons between cultures to make cultural content more relevant to Japanese lives;
- the course books should include some more activities and/or sections for peer teaching to provide an opportunity to learn from others;
- the sections for self-assessment, such as the “Self- assessment log” in the case of *Interactions 2 Reading* should include also grammar activities not only vocabulary;

- the section entitled “Learning to learn” with a glossary/dictionary and keywords to remember should be included on a side corner of the text;
- the integration of skills in the course books should be done in the following order: from receptive skills (reading and listening) to productive skills (speaking and writing) with the focus on communicative skills;
- the course books should include more differentiated materials, sections and activities to suit Japanese learners with different proficiency in English.

For further research it is recommended to investigate teachers’ opinions on these course books in terms of their suitability for the examinations both in Japan and Canada. As the world, cultures and people have been changing, educational systems and ELT materials are improved respectively. Constant modifications are needed in materials design, implementation and evaluation.

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