



## Detextualizing TEFL

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# Detextualizing TEFL

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## 1. Introduction

Nearly ten years ago the Japanese Ministry of Education specified English communication for Japanese students as one of its main mission statement directives. Their initiative notwithstanding, significant progress towards enabling students to converse in English is limited at best. From 2011 English became a compulsory (albeit restricted) part of the elementary school curriculum, although the ability of those given the responsibility for this remains in question as they are largely pre-existing elementary school teachers of other subjects with no assumed expertise in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language). High school English in Japan is still geared towards the passing of college entrance exams, which rarely have communication as their main objective. This means that English education retains a bookish, grammar-translation core not conducive to communication. Neither can those going on to study English as a major or minor subject at college expect to find a clear solution to their lack of communicative ability, partly due to the alienating approach of commercial textbooks, with culture tending to dominate language in mainline Western texts, and a tendency to obsessive rule dissection (much of which is quickly outdated and inappropriate) in domestic alternatives. This is underscored by the traditional tertiary approach where English is taught and studied indirectly using Japanese with uncoordinated classes in literature, grammar and so on. Even the few “conversation” classes that exist are by and large heavily textualized, making communication difficult at best. Along the lines of authoritative thinking on the subject of local content and technique (e.g. “Decisions about appropriate methodology should be made by local educators, taking their students’ needs into account” D. Larsen-freeman and M. H. Long, ‘Perspectives’ XXIV, 2, 5-11, *An Introduction to SLA Research*, Longman 1991) developing courses through student co-operation, contextualized to meet their immediate needs may be one solution. Teachers need to embrace responsibility for their classes to foster spontaneity, investing time and commitment in materials and methodology preparation to increase students’ motivation and be more independent of texts that are mass-produced only for the former’s convenience. After all, individual teachers should know their own classes best, so who better to tailor their own text-free teaching? Task-based possibilities hold promise, extendable from basic communication to proficiency exam prepping. All that is necessary to begin text-free (t-f) teaching is within our reach – teachers communicating with each other and students to educate and react affirmatively to free-flowing feedback.

## **2. Textbook Pros and Cons**

Experienced and informed experts are behind many textbooks. They are conversant with both the latest TEFL theories and related research concerns. Publishers usually know how to give their materials the necessary presentation and visual appeal that students will respond to. To organize large numbers of students over many classes, the structure, goals, organization and assessment methods of many textbooks are attractive to administrators wishing to establish and maintain what they perceive as a single vision and the ideal standards for students. Especially for beginning teachers, the extra support that a text offers may be a necessity. Similarly, teachers with hard schedules or those with other concerns may simply conclude that they lack the time to prepare classes by themselves. Many also argue that students themselves are in favor of textbooks, although there has not been adequate research as yet to confirm or deny this, and their reasons may be quite different from administrators and even instructors.

However, to give teaching spoken English communication the kind of validity it requires to be successful, there is no substitute for the complete involvement at all stages of the individual instructor, which is not possible with textbooks written by those who do not know the exact situation of their classrooms, and much less so by administrations unqualified to decide on what and how conversation should be taught. By definition, conversation is live and unscripted, so using a textbook is bound to be artificial and may defy the 90% of face-to-face communication which is paralinguistic. Then there are the logistics of the environment - no mainstream textbook could ever pretend to address the concerns of each individual class that its producers anonymously hope to sell their wares to. The similarities between textbooks can also be de-motivating as students may not be able to relate to the same old ideas offered. There is only so much a textbook can provide content-wise, while professional instructors can muster the breadth and flexibility of content necessary to adjust, adapt and switch directions quickly.

## **3. Research Objectives**

This research therefore questions if, in the context of teaching English as a foreign language for oral and aural communication, regular textbooks can be sufficiently adaptable to individual teaching situations, and if, for teachers using their own materials, there is not more scope for appropriately customizing such materials. Related issues include to what extent teachers select textbooks on the basis of the popularity of the author or surface appeal, instead of devising more appropriate plans by themselves, as well as the differences in perception of textbook use between teachers and students, as the way that the former and the latter see and use texts may vary fundamentally, so there may be insufficient common ground to enable significant learning.

If teachers unquestioningly follow text-teaching guides, or misapply books mistakenly, the value of texts may be brought into question. Either way, students may come away with less than they expected. In a communicative context, can texts even become significant obstacles to acquisition? It is important to gauge to

what extent students see their textbooks as a rigid model of limited expressions, inadaptable to most of their needs, or as a glorified vocabulary list, devoid of any living context. Do they ultimately use them for reading at best, or as a test review crib, side-stepping any purported communicative goals? Doesn't the set list of grammar and functions common in so many cases merely reinforce the failure of most previous textbooks?

As a potential alternative, can a text-free approach be flexible enough for both individual students and their class contexts? In theory at least, a t-f course should be customizable to the specific needs of the group. With teachers designing their own lessons, we would suggest that it is more likely for them to achieve greater understanding of the aims of the course and the techniques needed to achieve them. Building on each previous lesson, the teacher may be able to plot the most successful course for the class, steadily profiling each student's abilities, weaknesses and possibilities. If the teacher is able to research the immediate situation of his class more efficiently, and thus construct a picture of everything necessary to maximize results, the prospects for the kind of communication proposed by the Japanese Ministry of Education may become more of a realistic possibility than before.

#### **4. How to Contextualize Teaching Content**

University students in Japan usually start their classes in spring just before a major holiday. Their initial needs will be to learn and practice how to describe themselves and each other in terms of their appearance and personality. They have just finished high school, and are typically no longer required to obey the same rules or dress and appearance codes. They need to learn their way around their new schools, and to learn about each other. In this way the content of their four-month term (for schools where the class schedule runs continuously as in the case of the particular example here) can literally be plucked out of the thin air around the classroom. Thus one appropriate set of themes for the first few months of lower intermediate first year university students who benefit from a tighter structure is:

*Describing appearance and personality*

*Giving on-campus directions*

*Making short term plans*

*Describing new and old schools*

*Giving first impressions of college life*

*Reporting on recent events*

*Explaining Japanese holidays*

*Describing family and friends*

*Giving directions around the school town*

*Describing modes of transport and distances*

*Comparing city and country life*

*Explaining travel routines and experiences*

### *Talking about diet and health*

Testing and assessment can be carried out initially, medially and finally in the form of recorded spoken interviews in pairs or groups to ascertain what if any progress is made.

## **5. Text-bound versus Text-free Teaching**

In this research we define text-bound (t-b) as any form of printed, recorded or cyber material that was pre-designed for Teaching English as a Foreign Language in advance of the individual instructor's employment thereof. Text-free (t-f) materials can also be printed, recorded or cyber, but were not originally designed for TEFL. Thus authentic materials including newspapers, music, movies and so on all fall into the domain of t-f materials, as do any materials wholly developed or devised by the teacher. This is the distinguishing feature in the original intent behind the materials. Conceptually, once authentic materials are customized for TEFL use, they become free texts, not t-b, as they are not fixed, but continually customizable for a variety of situations and contexts. T-f materials similarly extend to classes designed orally by the teacher, completely independently of any physical form. These may have been a long time in the planning in the mind of the teacher, or even the improvised product of his or her live and unrehearsed classroom interaction, as the moment of interface between teacher and student may be simultaneously the moment of the creation of the teaching idea when the intensity of the experience stimulates spontaneous design.

## **6. Research Background**

Of 11 teachers of spoken English at the university where this research was conducted, 9 (80%+) gave t-b classes (see **12. Conversation Textbooks Used 2010-2011**) 1 used a cyber-text (10%-, adjudged a t-b text by students) in the form of a fixed computer software program, and 1 (10%-) used no textbook. This suggests that the vast majority of teachers believe in t-b teaching. However, to what degree is this also true for students? If students, the main shareholders in their own education, do not believe textbooks are the best or only solution, can we measure up to their expectations and the salaries that their fees provide? This research seeks to identify if students are being best served in a crucial proficiency area. If students who believe that t-f teaching is better can become more motivated and proficient as a result, those responsible for teaching them need to reflect on their approach, and consider t-f alternatives. Accordingly, before conducting the research survey, we hypothesized that: "There is a positive relationship between proficiency and text independence." Before proceeding, it is necessary to state the danger of directionality in the cause-and-effect relationship of ability, which no amount of investigation can rule out. Are students achieving the best results on proficiency tests good because they do not like textbooks, or do they like not using textbooks because they are good regardless. Or is the result caused by some other reason entirely? In any event it is impossible to rule out the possibility that no test of any kind can truly measure proficiency. Nonetheless, as one means of estimating

ability and ascertaining effect, we can still aim to establish whether the hypothesis has some degree of likelihood.

## 7. Outline of Research Survey

The principal subjects were a class of third year English majors, the final year of the school's conversation program, in an upper English group, streamed according to annual TOEIC results. Interviews took place without warning half way through the course, lasting exactly the same time of ten minutes for each student. Final interviews were in the format of an open discussion summarized in the final section.

Subjects were free to answer in their L1 or L2, Japanese or English, the interviewer having the facility in both to record answers accurately. In Interview One they answered questions independently, not communicating with or being aware of others' responses. The questions were asked in the same way to each student, and the questions and responses appear below.

Questions 1) to 10) were answered verbally, and Question 11) (a) to (j) on a 5-point scale from "Not at all good" (1 point) to "Excellent" (5 points).

- 1) How many conversation classes have you had?
- 2) How many of them have used a text book?
- 3) How did you use the textbook?
- 4) How many of them have not used a text book?
- 5) How did you study?
- 6) Did you prefer to use a text book or not? Why?
- 7) What is different about using or not using one?
- 8) What can you only do with a text?
- 9) What can you do without a text differently?
- 10) How are the techniques different?
- 11) How good do you think using versus not using English class text books is:
  - (a) for communicating with other people?
  - (b) for communicating what you want to say?
  - (c) for communicating how you think and feel?
  - (d) for communicating with gestures?
  - (e) for communicating in real language?
  - (f) for communicating about real culture?
  - (g) for communicating about real people?
  - (h) for communicating with useful vocabulary?
  - (i) for communicating appropriately?
  - (j) for communicating enjoyably?

## 8. Results

1) The average number of classes taken was between 6 and 7, or 2 per year.

2) The average number of classes using textbooks was 6, and the computer software used was deemed by students to be a text. The ratio was therefore approximately over 90% of classes taken using texts to about 10% not using texts

3) As for how students used the textbooks:

40% of students used textbooks for reading.

20% used textbooks for filling blanks.

20% listened to the teacher talking about the text.

10% used them to prepare and review for tests.

Other comments included using less than half of the text, and that textbooks were boring because they could not relate to them.

4) The average number of classes not using textbooks was just below 10%.

5) As for the main way that students studied in classes without textbooks:

45% talked with each other in English.

45% used printed materials.

The remaining students did not specify.

6) Nine students (80+%) preferred no text book.

The main reasons given were:

6 students (67%) said they could communicate with each other much more, and more realistically than when using a text book.

The remaining students preferring not to use a textbook said that they could listen more carefully to each other without textbooks and that not using a text helped them avoid using a limited number of stereotypical expressions.

The two students (less than 20%) who preferred using texts said that they did so because they could review and prepare for tests by reading a textbook.

7)-10) Not using a textbook - Students preferring not using a text book made the following points:

They learned more communication skills.

There was more time for communication.

Listening effort to both the teacher and other students increased.

They tried to speak more.

Their conversations were more spontaneous.

They made more eye contact.

They were more motivated.

They learnt more about their classmates.

They were positive about speaking voluntarily.

7.-10. Using a textbook - Students preferring to use a text book made the following points:

They could memorize the textbook.

They could learn vocabulary.

There were more varieties of patterns used.

7)-10) Other points - Other points made were:

One student preferring not to use textbooks said it was possible to copy from the textbooks, but disliked doing so.

One student who preferred textbooks said students could write memos if they were not using textbooks.

11.1) How good do you think using English class text books is:

1 = *Not at all good* 2 = *Not very good* 3 = *Okay* 4 = *Good* 5 = *Excellent*

(a) for communicating with other people = Not very good (2.5)

(b) for communicating what you want to say = Okay (3.0)

(c) for communicating how you think and feel = Not very good (2.8)

(d) for communicating with gestures = Not very good (2.1)

(e) for communicating in real language = Okay (3.0)

(f) for communicating about real culture = Okay (3.5)

(g) for communicating about real people = Not very good (2.7)

(h) for communicating with useful vocabulary = Good (4.2)

(i) for communicating appropriately = Not very good (2.6)

(j) for communicating enjoyably = Not very good (2.8)

Overall evaluation with textbooks

= Not very good (2.96)

11.2) How good do you think not using English class text books is:

(a) for communicating with other people = Good (4.0)

(b) for communicating what you want to say = Good (4.0)

(c) for communicating how you think and feel = Good (4.0)

(d) for communicating with gestures = Good (4.5)

(e) for communicating in real language = Good (4.3)

(f) for communicating about real culture = Okay (3.6)

(g) or communicating about real people = Good (4.2)

(h) for communicating with useful vocabulary = Okay (3.1)

(i) for communicating appropriately = Good (4.5)

(j) for communicating enjoyably = Good (4.4)

Overall evaluation without textbooks

= Good (4.24)

## 9. Comments

While the sample is small, it was a homogenous group with extensive experience of both texts and teachers, the numbers of which are substantial enough to give students a sufficiently broad view of various approaches. As high proficiency learners, they know how to use texts to the best advantage, so the low ranking assigned gives their verdict more credibility. The indication is that texts tend to obstruct spoken creativity by stifling students with fixed phrases to memorize.

## 10. Text-free Course Outline Example

Below an overall course outline of a year 3, single semester course of sixteen 90 minute weekly classes for a group of 20 students with 2 years' previous conversation experience is given. Items (1), (3), (4) and (5) lasted 3 classes each. Items (2) and (6) were ongoing. The remaining items plus feedback, evaluations and so on took the rest of the time available.

(1) Half the students interviewed the other half a class at a time, asking their own or teacher's questions and continuing:

“Tell me more?” or “Why?”

If students answer “No” they continued “but ...” and ask in return “How about you?”

(2) Students interviewed a group of three students each week spontaneously.

(3) Students interviewed older students who studied abroad for a year.

(4) Students interviewed exchange students whose first language is English.

(5) Student pairs prepared and performed customized TOEIC-like question/responses, and conversations for other pairs.

(6) Class content was reviewed, remediated and extended in subsequent classes.

(7) Students took mid-term (conversation sections) and final (talk sections) practice TOEIC for assessment, with scores rising 5% (from an average of 70% to 75%) on the harder test, significant as higher scorers have less leeway to improve quickly.

Final student comments:

*At first I felt nervous but I quickly overcame this.*

*I became responsible for my own listening and speaking unlike in textbook classes.*

*The class was spontaneous and in the moment, like real conversation.*

*There were more chances to listen and speak.*

*My confidence and ability increased.*

*Eye-to-eye communication made me more aware of the importance of communicating not only using words.*

*Such a lesson is essential to increase the overall effect of the conversation classes I also had using textbooks.*

*I improved more than with a textbook, and felt an improvement from one lesson to the next in exchange*

*student classes.*

*I would like to continue with this kind of class because of the positive and co-operative atmosphere that it achieved.*

*It was interesting to try talking with guests from both inside and outside school.*

*I felt my confidence in and ability at talking with exchange students visiting our class increase each time we met.*

## **11. Conclusion**

EFL conversation textbooks do have a role to play, but not a dominating or exclusive one. For new teachers who need continuing training, text books can help. While the content of mainline textbooks and the approach of domestic alternatives may have limited scope, the structure and organization of the former and content of the latter can give both novices and experienced teachers productive ideas. Students too can benefit from textbooks in terms of their own use of them, as distinct from the latter's original purport, and from instructors' interpretations of their purposes. However, over-reliance on textbooks can become an excuse for not attempting more meaningful and productive approaches. Students use textbooks differently from the ways intended for them by writers and teachers. The percentage distribution in **8. Results**, 3) (40% of students using textbooks for reading, 20% for filling blanks, 10% for test preparation and review, etc.) plus the higher scoring in **8. Results**, 11.1) (communicating what they want to say, in real language, about real culture and using useful vocabulary) suggest that students see texts as a resource. A t-f approach returns student learning ownership. Relevance, localization and personalization of content are the most effective for learning. Normal texts do not allow for this due to the blanket scope of their audience. Only a more formal study can verify the hypothesis "There is a positive relationship between proficiency and text independence" but the informal pilot research outlined above suggests that it would be worth pursuing. Higher level students feel more confident with such an authentic approach, being better able to formulate their own objectives. A future school-wide study could also categorize student responses on the basis of attitudes, strategies for using English and such personal factors as motivation and anxiety.

Overuse of textbooks can cause teachers to be lazy, to become monotonous, to fail to recognize student needs and to leave no room for adjustment or creativity. The general use of teaching other subjects in a rigidly t-b fashion may also contribute to the tongue-tied image holding Japanese students back. On the other hand, negotiating content (keeping in mind curricular requirements) and including new media that match students' preferred style of interaction can bring back the learning to the students. As indicated in the hypothesis, the evaluation of a t-f approach positively correlates with language proficiency, facilitating a level-specific approach and real-time adjustments that text-bound inflexibility cannot cope with.

A t-f approach is organic and emanates from students' actuality, both in terms of relevant content and ability. It is possible to both pinpoint students' proficiency across all the skill areas in a timely fashion, and

to remediate the weaker areas as an ongoing part of such a course. In a t-b class, even if it were possible to ascertain such vital information within the rigid framework of the approach, it is unlikely that this can be achieved in time to do anything effective about it. A t-b approach might be relevant for students taking a course of one or two semesters, but for those intending to continue for more than a year, the prospects are too limited. At the very least, t-f course segments must form an essential component of any ongoing university English conversational study or students will not have the chance to develop their communicative ability, and the Japanese Ministry of Education's mandate for Japanese to acquire such will continue to be denied.

## **12. Conversation Textbooks Used 2010-2011**

*Adventures Abroad*, Fuller/Cleary (MacMillan)

*Breakthrough*, Craven (MacMillan)

*English in 30 Seconds*, Aoki (Nan'undo)

*Face to Face*, Fuller (MacMillan)

*New Changing Themes*, Dale and Fuller

*On The Go*, Gershon, Mares/Walker (Pearson)

*On The Move*, Gershon/Mares/Walker (Pearson)

*Passport 1*, Mark Saunders (OUP)

*Streamline American Departures*, Hartley/Viney (OUP)

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