



## Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication-Part Two

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# Using Still Images for Spoken English Communication-Part Two

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## **Introduction**

In this, the second part of the consideration of still images in teaching spoken English as a foreign language, we first summarize the essentials of the preceding studies that have led to this point (see Wood 2011 to 2012). Then we go back to the original methodological shift which prompted the previously outlined content and techniques. After that we present the results of the follow-up research (replicating the survey initially conducted in 2011) to see whether the positive response from the previous assessment (80% of students in favor of not using a textbook, and only one opposed out of approximately 20 subjects) is confirmed or not. The future implications of this approach will then be deliberated. It will be posited that the longer students are acquainted with a text-free approach incorporating their own travel photographs, the more positive their reactions will be, consolidating and even strengthening the high ratings attained from the medium term exposure of the original survey. This tendency can be demonstrated by comparing reactions to the course both qualitatively and quantitatively over a shorter and a more extended case study.

## **Origins and Evolution**

When first assigned third year university English Department conversation classes several years ago, to move to a completely text free (t-f) approach away from the text bound (t-b) approach (prevalent in teaching spoken English communication to non-native speakers both in the writer's school and in many other places in Japan and abroad) the writer required students to take it in turns to sit at the front of the class to be interviewed by the rest of the class, each session concentrating on 1 group of 2 or 3 interviewees. Other students had to prepare varied questions in advance to elicit the group's introductions. After all the students had done so over the first half of the course, the second half of the course was for students (again in pairs or more) to choose a topic they were interested in to present individually, optionally developing out of their first round self-introductions, or something else that was not covered there. Many if not most of the students chose their travel experiences (in Japan or abroad, near or far) as either the central focus, or as a background aspect of their topics. This identified students' personal travel experiences as being one of if not the most popular and productive topic to use in conversation classes, being an expert on a subject of interest to almost all.

One weakness with this format was that some of the students appeared less confident than others. To attempt to overcome this, the practice of using personal photos was introduced as students became noticeably

more confident when, combined with extra visual support, they were responsible for a topic about which they were the main authority. This not only increased general interest in a natural way, but also offered clues and stimulation both for them to express their experience, as well as for others to make prompt questions about the events and situation surrounding the target students' memories. Based on student feedback, seating was reorganized around tables moved together in an oblong arrangement in a small classroom as close proximity is most conducive to communication.

During the interaction between students only, the teacher left the "circle" so that students were face to face with each other, and thus left more and more with the responsibility of initiating and developing their own interactions with only minimal direction, culminating in almost totally independent communication. This was achieved on the understanding that communicative fluency and not grammatical accuracy was the ultimate goal, so that only when there was a complete breakdown did the teacher offer advice, and even then, the advice was nearly always for the students to solve the impasse by themselves in the form of asking each other to repeat, use other words, spell, or in the most extreme cases, translate, all of which can be valid and vital communicative tools in the right context. In this way, students' confidence and comfort levels increased enough to eventually facilitate classes where they could manage almost undisturbed streams of meaningful and independent conversation unassisted by the teacher for more sustained periods than otherwise.

At the beginning of the course the teacher can use his or her own personal travel photos to illustrate how they could be employed to stimulate interaction, build confidence and augment understanding, as well as to give students the necessary experience, training and readiness to make the best use thereof. Only when students can function in this manner and gain enough confidence in talking about these photos should they be asked to bring their own pictures to be used in class.

## **The Original Research**

The original research question posed was "In the context of teaching English to speakers of other languages (particularly in the Japanese university context) for oral and aural communication, could any kind of text suffice in terms of its adaptability to the innumerable individual teaching situations, or would some kind of non-textbook approach be more effective." The sheer effort teachers have to expend on trying to compensate for a text's inadequacies was concluded as being better spent developing their own ideas. These would be more contextualized and relevant as individual teachers should both know their own classes best, as well as be professionally accountable and adept enough to confront this necessary building block of teaching by taking complete responsibility for determining the content that students most need. Texts can make us so lazy that we forget our role.

To this end, a survey of students' experience and appraisal of text books was conducted, and the results were presented. We shall now summarize those findings and compare them to the follow-up survey that took place during the following year to establish whether the original indications were confirmed or not.

In addition to comparing the new comments that arose with those made by the original research subjects, their quantitative assessment of the communicative value of using texts versus not using them was assessed. Naturally it would be impossible to take into account all the possible alternatives to a t-b approach, but at least as regards using travel photos as the central impetus for communication, one example of a text-free style of teaching can be evaluated against a fairly representative range of conversational text books which the subjects have already experienced.

## **The Follow-up Research**

As with the initial year of this study, 2011, of the 20 independent semester long conversation classes from Year 1 up to Year 3 in the English Department at the university where this research was conducted, all but the current author's consisted of text-based (t-b) classes (see the detailed list of texts used at the end of the paper, which is almost identical to that presented for the 2011 study.) Only one, the present writer's, used no text. Thus the vast majority of teachers still cling uncritically to inflexible t-b teaching despite the indications that their students may not think the same way. This makes a follow up study vital to show one way or the other if the first results were valid.

The original research had strongly suggested that students, the main shareholders in their own education, did not concur so unquestioningly with texts as the only or best possibility, and that there was a positive relationship between proficiency development and text independence. So this finding can also be confirmed or refuted by the findings of the replication survey presented below. Main factors of the 2011 survey were kept constant in 2012, but with a different length of exposure.

Similarly to subjects in the preceding year's survey, these points also applied to the 2012 survey:

- Subjects were 1 of 3 classes of third year English majors, streamed by yearly TOEIC results.
- The 10 minute survey took place without warning part way through the course.
- Students were free to answer questions either in English or in Japanese.
- They answered independently, not being aware of their fellow classmates' responses.
- The questions were all asked in the same way, and the questions and summarized responses appear below. The original data has been preserved to ensure their integrity.
- Questions 1-9 were in written form and produced a wide range of answers compared below.
- Question 10 consisted of ten related items answerable on a five-point scale, from "Not at all good" (1) through "Not very good" (2) "Okay" (3) and "Good" (4) up to "Excellent" (5). They aimed to measure all possible communicative aspects of students' perceptions.

## **The Survey Questions**

The questions for written answers appear below. They have been partly re-organized and merged to

ensure greater clarity on the basis of the actual responses arising. Questions 1 to 9 are qualitative:

1. *How many conversation classes have you had?*
2. *How many of your conversation classes have used a text book?*
3. *How did you use the textbook?*
4. *Did you prefer to use a text book or not?*
5. *What are the main uses of a text book?*
6. *What are the results of using a text book?*
7. *What are the main uses of not studying with a text book?*
8. *What are the results of not using a text book?*
9. *Do you have any other comments?*

The 10 part quantitative question answered on a 5 point Likert scale was as follows:

10. *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?

2011 results versus 2012 results (similar or nearly the same result or comments are **in bold type**)

1. 2011 The average number of spoken communication classes = 6.5. 1. 2012 Average number = 5.5.

(The drop in the number of single semester class takers may be due to changes in the status of some conversation classes over recent years from compulsory to optional, meaning that classes which are not considered of worth by students may be less well attended than those which are. Students have begun to make clear their true evaluations of the classes available to them from Year 2 on, with wide ranges in size from only 5 or so students up to 50 or more. Usually classes around 10 or below (a third of should be takers) can be considered non-functioning when there should be 20 to 30 takers. The overall number of takers has dropped significantly as students express their frustration at the methodology offered, opting not to take courses by some teachers, or to drop out of the program entirely. Year 3 students are experienced enough to recognize a class that does not suit their needs. Classes in both of the surveys were fixed at around 20 based on students' preceding year's TOEIC scores, so could not rise - the class in the survey could not exceed this number, but when subsequently taught with a text, the number of takers drops by more than 50 per cent. In some cases students joined a class that they were not supposed to as they felt a need to study but not with the instructor

and text used. Even students taking a class they are not supposed to may be preferable to not taking any class at all, and serves as an important indicator of the perceived worth of one class over another. It is hoped that teachers who have not so far attempted to answer students' requirements as the principle shareholders in their own education now pay more attention to what students indicate they want, and attempt feedback surveys of their teaching content and styles to justify their professional responsibility and re-examine their approach, as students pay high fees and expect to receive the kind of teaching which they can respect. Mandated semester evaluations are tardy and not enough to identify crucial specifics, but have recently benefitted from increased student supervision of the process, complete comment inclusion and a message from the president.)

2. 2011 Average number of classes using texts or software deemed a text was 6 - **1 used no text.**

*2. 2012 Average number of classes using texts or software deemed a text was 5 - **1 used no text.***

(TEFL texts are those marketed to teach students English whose first language is not English and are usually for anyone studying in his or her own country. As such publishers and authors cannot know the specific circumstances or needs of all the diverse groups assigned these texts. Texts thus risk being random in respect to their targets, uninformed about their requirements and too inflexible for meaningful feedback or adjustment. Similarly, instructors who market their own text books risk being profit-motivated, which is another reason for using the so-called Dogme (Thornbury, 2001) approach that has been gaining considerable momentum in reaction to publishers' blanket approach. While Dogme does not cover only conversation, but rather uses it as a medium for learning, its principles attract a lot of interest, as witness the large number of related talks at IATEFL in 2012.)

3. 2011 The main student uses stated for textbooks were:

**reading,**

filling blanks,

listening to the teacher reading the text, and

preparing for tests.

*3. 2012 The main student uses stated for text books were:*

**reading and writing,**

*homework,*

*vocabulary, and*

*memorization.*

(In neither set of results do students see any specific spoken purposes for textbooks. This indicates a major flaw in the persistent reliance on delegating the central focus of spoken communication classes to textbooks. In both, reading not speaking was perceived as one of the main uses.)

4. 2011 **80% of students preferred no text book.**

*4. 2012 **85% of students preferred no textbook.***

(Though the original result was high, the more recent one exceeded it perhaps because of the extended experience of learning spoken communication without texts. In 2011, one student stated a preference for

textbooks, while in the 2012 survey, not even a single student vouched for textbooks.)

5. 2011 Student perceived uses of studying with textbooks included:

**to memorize the textbook to review and prepare for tests**

5. *2012 Student perceived uses of studying with textbooks included:*

***for rote memorization, and for reviewing by reading,***

*25% found no use for textbooks.*

(In the latter set of comments, students were more emphatic about the lack of value of textbooks for them, possibly due to longer exposure to a t-f approach of twelve compared to six 90 minute-long classes. Extra comments less relevant to this section will be mentioned in subsequent sections.)

6. 2011 Students perceived results of using textbooks:

They could learn vocabulary.

There were several varieties of patterns used.

6. *2012 Students perceived results of using textbooks:*

*There was too much reading and not enough feeling.*

*The language, ideas and expression were inflexible.*

(Instead of listing positive uses of textbooks, students made almost entirely negative comments in the follow up survey, again possibly caused by the more extensive text free class time which the 2012 survey students were able to experience and appreciate.)

7. 2011 The main uses students associated with not using textbooks included:

Learning vocabulary, and learning language patterns

7. *2012 Techniques students associated with not using textbooks included:*

*more chances to communicate, to build more ability, as well as,*

*to have more natural interactions; and,*

*to be able to concentrate on listening not reading.*

(As with the preceding question results, a greater number of uses of a t-f course was recognized by the subjects surveyed in 2012 as the latter group could experience the wider and more extensive series of activities made possible by not allowing a text book to dominate and dictate the content and flow of the course. Moreover, the nature of the perceived uses was far more communicative in nature in the follow up survey as compared with the original, indicating a fundamental qualitative shift.)

8. 2011 Student perceived results of studying without a textbook included:

There was more time for communication and more eye contact, and

listening effort to both the teacher and other students increased.

They learnt more about their classmates, and

they were positive about speaking voluntarily.

**They learned more communication skills.**

**Their conversations were more spontaneous.**

**They tried to speak more and they were more motivated.**

8. 2012 Student perceived results of studying without a textbook included:

*They used various kinds of language, and they could express their ideas and feelings better.*

*They could think independently, and they could enjoy relaxed conversations.*

***They could learn native-like communication; they could talk freely; and, they could speak more and felt more motivated to talk.***

(There was a significant concurrence in students perceived t-f uses, and even with those points not directly resembling one another, the positive elements perceived were abundant and closely related.)

9. 2012 Additional comments about not using a textbook:

*They could listen more carefully to each other without a text.*

*Not using a text helped them avoid using a limited number of stereotypical expressions.*

*By using their own photos in a non-text-book situation:*

*They felt this was more interesting.*

*It made it easier to talk.*

*There were more diverse topics.*

*They could learn about each other and each other's feelings.*

*They could participate enthusiastically.*

*They learned paralinguistic features.*

*They could use their own imagination.*

*They were happier. (25%)*

(The additional comments above only arose in the follow up survey and have been listed to show the impact of longer use. The wide range of additional benefits perceived by the 2012 survey students in respect to the advantages of not using texts indicates something about the potential of the approach to appeal to them individually and strongly suggests that the longer they are exposed to this approach the more they can see all the extra benefits that they could not get with a text based approach. This also accounts for the inclusion of points referring to the use of photos.)

10. 2011 Rate these questions 1=Not at all good 2=Not very good 3=Okay 4=Good 5=Excellent

(The biggest changes are **in bold face**)

*How good do you think using textbooks/not using texts for communication is:*

(a) for communicating with other people = 2.5/4.0

(b) for communicating what you want to say = **3.0/4.0**

(c) for communicating how you think and feel = **2.8/4.0**

(d) for communicating with gestures = 2.1/4.5

(e) for communicating in real language = **3.0/4.3**

(f) for communicating about real culture = **3.5/3.6**

(g) for communicating about real people = **2.7/4.2**

(h) for communicating with useful vocabulary = **4.2/3.1**

(i) for communicating appropriately = 2.6/4.5

(j) for communicating enjoyably = **2.8/4.4**

OVERALL RESULT WITH TEXTBOOKS = 2.96 Not Very Good.

OVERALL RESULT WITHOUT TEXTBOOKS = 4.24 Good.

10. 2012Rate these questions 1=Not at all good 2=Not very good 3=Okay 4=Good 5=Excellent

(The biggest changes are in bold face)

How good do you think using textbooks/not using texts for communication is:

(a) for communicating with other people = 2.75/4.4

(b) for communicating what you want to say = **2.8/4.2**

(c) for communicating how you think and feel = **2.5/4.55**

(d) for communicating with gestures = 2.6/4.55

(e) for communicating in real language = **2.6/4.35**

(f) for communicating about real culture = **2.6/ 4.1**

(g) for communicating about real people = **2.3/ 4.65**

(h) for communicating with useful vocabulary = **3.4/4.3**

(i) for communicating appropriately = 2.7/4.25

(j) for communicating enjoyably = **2.45/ 4.85**

OVERALL RESULT WITH TEXTBOOKS = **2.67** Not Very Good.

OVERALL RESULT WITHOUT TEXTBOOKS = **4.435** Good.

(Reinforcing the indication of responses to Questions 1 through 9 that longer exposure to a t-f approach only strengthens students' positive reactions, seven out of ten of the items (that is, all but (a), (b) and (i)) displayed significant change. Here significance is taken to be demonstrated by a movement in both directions - the evaluation of t-b effectiveness dropping and that of t-f effectiveness rising. This double movement strongly indicates confirmation of the strengthening of subjects' positive reactions (not present in any of the three remaining items) and is further corroborated by the overall result which also displayed a double ended swing further in favor of a t-f approach. As for the items not displaying this double shift, (a), (b) and (i), this may have been due to the fact the original 2011 gaps were already too large (from 1.4 to 1.9) to change much more rather than to any weakness in a t-f approach in their regard, and as such were already highly significant.)

## Comments

While both 2011 and 2012 case study subject numbers were mid-size at about twenty, both groups were homogenous, with extensive experience of numerous texts and teachers, the extent of which was substantial enough to give students a relatively clear and mature view of the various approaches offered by a broad range of instructors, male, female, younger, older and of different nationalities, with diverse experience and training

(though American and female teachers have been limited to teaching first years almost exclusively, risking an unhealthy dialectical imbalance). Partly because every year students have to take the US based TOEIC, which features half female and half male primarily American native English speakers, second and third year students may feel that they need more female and American teachers than they are currently being allowed.

As higher proficiency learners, subjects could be expected to know how best to use texts, so the even lower ranking assigned to a t-b approach in the follow-up survey only serves to give their verdict more credibility. One perceived inference of their evaluations is that texts tend to obstruct spoken creativity by stifling them with fixed phrases to memorize by rote. They also cited the cost of texts, and the fact that they are often only partially used (adding emotional insult to financial injury) as problems. As suggested above, further indication of the validity of a non-textbook approach was offered by the fact that, while the 2011 survey was conducted about half way through the course when students had experienced just under half of the total sessions, or after 40% of the course, the survey took place after 12 weeks of classes (or 80% of the way through) in 2012. In 2011 this was because of practical considerations as the results were due for presentation. Therefore, even though the 2011 group had a very positive reaction to learning without textbooks (80% of subjects in favor of abandoning textbooks altogether with just one student in favor of keeping them) the even more positive result of the 2012 group (85% in favor of foregoing textbooks, with not even a single student supporting their use) would appear to reinforce the tendency of students to rate the text-free approach more and more highly the longer that they are exposed to it and come to understand it.

A new feature of the 2012 results as compared to the 2011 data is that students were very eager to comment on the use of their travel photos in their evaluations. In 2011, they had had less extensive exposure to this style of study as the first couple of classes were mainly for self-introductions. In the 2012 class, they had used their travel photos extensively, so that they could comment in detail on their prolonged experience. As their comments were so enthusiastic, this suggests that the longer use of photos was a central reason for the even more overall positive reaction than the 2011 group. The outcome of the 2011 group's experience is treated below when considering the approach's future.

In both 2011 and 2012, students' confidence and comfort levels increased enough to facilitate an almost undisturbed stream of meaningful conversation, as indicated internally both by students' class evaluations and self-assessments, and objectively corroborated by their ability to communicate with visiting American exchange students in the concluding sessions of the program. The latter rated this class the best that they had participated in out of the extensive range of courses which they audited, the content of many of which ranged beyond conversation. In both 2011 and 2012, students were allowed to manage their interactions with American students free from the teacher's direction. On the in house school wide rankings the class scored nearly the maximum while the comparable text based class failed to get anywhere near the average with fewer students enrolling. (See **Appendix**)

## **Future Implications**

The number of students applying to this writer's seminar (the largest of the ten fourth year seminar groups at over twenty, with the second most popular an American female teacher not allowed to teach conversation) prompted by their experience of third year conversation classes, indicated the high degree of enthusiasm that this style of learning can generate. In response to their expectations, the seminar's content and nature were modified. Instead of the normal focus on written assessments (though this has regularly proven popular) the course was amended to incorporate students' photos, and the subsequent assessment was oral not written. As most had already used their own travel photos previously, they were given a free choice of what kind of photo to present. Many chose travel again, but not the same pictures as before. They tended to bring more photos, and not only from a single experience, indicating their willingness to participate, experiment and extend their range of communication in various directions. They also chose photos from their high school days, friends' weddings and so on. This made the interactions richer and more intensive, expanding their use of English significantly. While in the previous year, the use of travel photos had dictated the opening part of their interaction to a fairly fixed fact-finding set of questions (where, when, who with, how long, how much, and so on) even in the original experience during the preceding year, questioning had quickly expanded to areas not directly concerned with travel, or even the photos being used. In their subsequent use of photos, they were markedly more relaxed and conversant, and multiple photo situations extended the conversations exponentially. The response was overwhelmingly positive. Not only were the communicative levels attained by the end of their third year conversation stable (when normally with a two month gap intervening between their final third year classes and first fourth classes there is a considerable regression as students tend to defer studying to part-time jobs, and of course, domestic and international travel, not to mention the fact that many third years drop out of text based Conversation altogether in the second half of their third year due to the reasons mentioned above) but they were also eager and ready to go to the next level. Spoken interview tests at the end of their first senior semester demonstrated significant gains in overall confidence, motivation and proficiency. This trend to progress was again indicated after the two month summer recess when students returned for their final semester. Usually the teacher has time to note the content of their discourse for review purposes in subsequent classes, but the speed of the interactions and intensity of engagement had become so fast and passionate that this was no longer possible. A future shift will be to digital images from hard copy in an age of smart telephony, subject to enough tech lab availability. This will also allow for multiple monitor display, editing and other media applications which can facilitate and develop natural communication and boost presentation performance and confidence.

## Conversation Texts Used in 2012 and References

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## Appendix - Student Comments

In formal class evaluations students can write their candid comments and rankings anonymously.

Below are representative examples of the comments received for the period relating to survey 2:

*" This class was very happy because we didn't use a text book. "*

*" It was really great that we could talk so much in English. "*

*" By not using a text book, the emphasis moved to speaking. "*

*" Compared to other Conversation classes, we could talk much more. "*

*" I was very happy to talk with the American exchange students. "*

*" I felt fulfilled because the class was so cheerful. "*

*" Without a textbook I could really enjoy learning English. "*

In contrast, the other third year conversation classes which ran at the same time provided almost no comment. As they were both text driven and placed much lower in student rankings, it is undeniable that the approach most common to teaching conversation (i.e. with texts) requires serious reconsideration. All teachers need to reflect on evaluation results with a view to improving educational standards. Greater awareness of the problems and sufficient integrity to remediate them with sincere quality assurance is overdue now that colleges not responding to students' expectations risk collapse because of Japan's long birth and student population decline plus economic malaise. Latest enrolments to conversation classes also indicate the limited appeal of some text based classes in particular, as enrolment numbers in the parallel classes from first to second semesters (when teachers swap classes making a direct comparison of the number of takers possible) are low from one year to the next, in both cases being more than twice as large for the text free classes as opposed to the classes using a text. Year 3 students, the most capable of making mature assessments, often

find the text based approach stale, repetitive and not useful for their true needs. As long as the text based approach is prevalent, students' true aims and expectations may not be addressed satisfactorily.

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