Speech Encounters in Japanese Textbooks for Communication: Types and Constructions in Oral Communication A

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This paper attempts to analyze in somewhat more concrete detail the rather abstract notion of 'conversation' and compares conversational texts in Japanese and foreign-produced oral communication textbooks. It is found that 'transactions' received very little emphasis in the Japanese textbooks in comparison to the foreign ones. It is suggested that this difference should be investigated further and remedied.

Introduction

More and more Japanese go abroad for various periods of time; from short term tourist trips, to a long term assignments. With this increase of foreign travel, the chance to communicate with others in English has been increasing. I too am no exception to this trend. When I went to a restaurant in California, U. S. A., I was very embarrassed in a difficult situation;

WAITRESS: Have you decided yet?
CUSTOMER: Yes, I want a · · · hamburger.
WAITRESS: How would you like it done?
CUSTOMER: ???

This is a reproduction of the exchange, which might not be exactly what I said. At that time, I did not have any idea what the waitress's second utterance meant and what I should have responded to her. In that situation, my brother, who was then studying in the United States, told me to show my preference for grill. That was why I could manage to come through as follows;

WAITRESS: How would you like it?
CUSTOMER: Medium, please.

As this experience showed, it is possible that we can not understand what others say or we do not know what to reply appropriately, on communicating with others in foreign language. I would like to examine the reasons for communication breakdown in this kind of conversation. Our concern is two-fold; a) if learners do not learn this kind of conversation, they might not be able to deal with it. b) learners would not achieve their communication thoroughly, even though they had learned it, if textbooks lack definite information on that situation. In this paper, the first assumption will be investigated.

Speech Encounters

We usually talk fairly casually about 'conversation'. Yet there are actually many types of conversation in daily life. Let us make our discussion more precise.
Tasaki (1990) states that two peculiar types of conversation exist in the Japanese EFL setting: Eikaiwa and Eigokaiwa.

**Eikaiwa**: socially or customarily routinized conversation spoken in English which is used on a special occasion. (ibid: 85-86 / my translation)

**Eigokaiwa**: an verbalization caused by a certain psychological or social representation on a special occasion. (ibid.: 86 / my translation)

The practical taxonomies of conversation are demonstrated by Lado (1988). He states “let us refer to this variety as speech encounters, and reserve conversation for the one major type” (ibid.: 155), and postulates that there are three types of speech encounters in our daily life; minimal encounters, transactions, and true conversations.

**Minimal Encounters:**
*Greetings*: these are standard stereotyped expressions and formulas used to establish verbal contact between speakers. Their function as greetings dominates their linguistic meaning. (ibid.: 155)

*Extended greetings*: when acquaintances meet casually, they often add some stereotyped questions and responses that are functionally part of the greeting more than full information queries. (ibid.: 156)

*Congratulation, special greetings and good wishes*: in many special occasion the function of complimenting someone is expressed by stereotyped formulas. (ibid.: 156)

**Transactions:**
In transactions, intention is to get something done, ... When the intention is achieved or aborted, the transactions ends. ... The intention of conversation is to socialize. ... Each of the many types of transactions requires specific expressions and formulas that must be learned as such. (ibid.: 157)

**True Conversations:**
Speech encounters whose main function is to allow the speaker to socialize by sharing ideas, feelings, hopes, and opinions in a flexible time frame are true conversations. They are broader in scope and more varied in form and usage than greetings, good wishes, and transactions. (ibid.: 159)

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*Figure 1. The relation between Tasaki’s and Lado’s types of conversation*
Figure 1. shows the relation between Tassak’s and Lado’s types of conversation. From this diagram, it can be said that the experience in the restaurant, referred to in the introduction, occurred in an Eikaiwa, type of transaction. Therefore, I would like to examine whether Japanese textbooks for communication handle transactional conversation.

Aim of Analysis: To identify if transactions are set up as the content of each lesson.

Objects of Analysis: All 17 current Oral Communication A textbooks (O.C.A. textbooks) authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education and, for comparison, three course books of communication for Japanese EFL learners which were produced by foreign publishers. (see appendix A, B)

Methods of Analysis: The following approach was employed in this analysis.

Data collection: lessons are adopted as the unit of this analysis.

Data processing: lessons are identified as speech encounters by the author and a colleague.

Data analysis: each lesson was counted as one point, and the total sum of the points was calculated for each textbook. Then the total percentage of each type of speech encounter were calculated for both Japanese and foreign textbooks and the results were compared.

Results and Discussions: Table 1. shows the results of the number of the situations dealt with in O. C. A. textbooks, and Figure 2. shows the percentage of the applicable lessons in the form of a bar chart.

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Figure 2. Lessons dealt with in O. C. A. textbooks

Figure 3. The types of speech encounters in O.C.A. textbooks and foreign course books

Figure 3 shows clearly a significant difference between O. C. A. textbooks and foreign course books. O.C.A. textbooks place great importance on true conversation, whereas foreign course books emphasize transactions. Why do they differ appreciably in contents? Generally, these two are designed for the same learners. However the reason for this difference probably lies in differing aims. As to foreign course books, the aim of the lessons is to live an overseas life. We can find this attitude in the teacher's guide of the course book Passport:

Passport is a 30-hour course in listening and speaking skills for false-begginer or elementary level Japanese students of English who are planning to go abroad for the first time. The type of student at whom this course is aimed is the learner who has studied English for a considerable length of time at high school, but who has had little opportunity to speak the language and lacks the ability to understand English as it is spoken by a native speaker. ... The materials in this course have been written in Japan, tested on Japanese students, and aim to guide the learner through a variety of situations which the first-time visitor abroad will encounter. (Buckingham 1995: 1)

In contrast, O. C. A. textbooks do not limit their situations to traveling or living abroad, and feature a lot of conversations carried on in Japanese classrooms or homes. That is the reason true conversation commands an absolute majority in O. C. A. textbooks.
Whereas it is true that O. C. A. textbooks might not limit their situations, this attitude does not directly allow true conversation a large portion in O. C. A. textbooks. We are safe in saying that textbooks should have balanced contents if their aim is a general one. Speech encounters also fall under this principle.

Furthermore, transactions are the kind of speech encounters in which we can not deliver the message if we do not have exact knowledge about each situation; hesitation and asking again are not usually desirable. In contrast to true conversations, transactions are supposed to progress along conversational scripts rather than by negotiation of meaning. The conversation in the introduction is a reasonable example where we can not carry through the conversation without exact knowledge of each script.

**Conclusion**

The question of selecting and sequencing teaching material should develop in accordance with the aims and the needs of learners. Visiting and living abroad are sure to be included in their aims and needs for ELT, and transactions would make a great contribution to achieving the goals of learners. In this regard, we should point out that current O. C. A. textbooks place too little emphasis on transactions, which is clear when they are compared to foreign course books. This is especially important since transactions are the kind of conversations which it is difficult for learners to accomplish without the knowledge of scripts.

The further direction of this study would include the following two questions: 1) what is the ideal proportion for each speech encounter in the Japanese EFL setting; and 2) whether the texts as the body of lessons are based on natural scripts of conversations.

**Note**

The reason three foreign course books were selected was that the main target was specially focused on Japanese EFL learners.

**References**


Appendix A

All 17 Current Oral Communication A textbooks authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education.


Appendix B

Three course books of communication for Japanese EFL learners which were produced by foreign publishers.