

# Part One: Japanese University Students' Perspectives on ESL Materials

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In this study, students' perspectives on the use of ESL materials in Japanese university second language classes were examined. The existing literature suggests that there are a number of benefits and limitations associated with using coursebooks in ESL classes. In addition, flexibility with material use is considered to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning. In order to understand student perspectives on teachers' use of ESL materials, a survey was conducted with 212 students. The results indicate that a more student-centered approach with materials might be beneficial to improve teaching and learning outcomes. However, since coursebook dependence still stands as a common issue in ESL classes, a future study would be beneficial to understand teachers' perspectives on the subject matter.

Key words: materials, ESL, Japanese, students, teachers, flexibility, student-centered.

## Introduction

Despite the increasing prevalence of online and technology-driven learning, coursebooks are still widely used in English language classrooms. A significant part of many lessons around the world involves the teacher and students doing exercises or tackling reading or listening materials from their coursebooks (Tomlinson, 2011). However, previous research studies suggest that heavy coursebook dependence may potentially diminish flexibility, spontaneity and creativity of teachers and thus, can hinder their contributions to their students' learning (Cunningsworth, 1995; Prodromou, 2002; Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2008).

This study attempts to understand Japanese university students' perspectives on their teachers' use of ESL materials. The findings of the study offer relevant insights and strategies are suggested to guide teachers toward a more effective use of ESL materials.

## Benefits of Coursebooks

Coursebooks are widely used in English language classrooms and oftentimes teachers are obliged to use one (Tomlinson, 2013). According to Howard and Major (2004), coursebooks play a major role in supporting both classroom teaching and learning. Furthermore, Angell and Gonglewski (2008) argue that visual aids provided by coursebooks are appealing to students as they can relate the images to their own life experiences and make the overall learning process more fun and interesting. Coursebooks also provide guidance for class preparations and give both students and teachers a sense of security since all the information and visual aids are compiled in one material (Maley & Tomlinson, 2017). Thus, teachers can devote more time to improving their teaching effectiveness compared to developing materials for classes.

Richards (2001) notes that the systematically planned and developed syllabus of coursebooks can allow learners to study independently both in and outside the class. Thus, coursebooks are essential for the self-directed learning process. In addition, the structured nature of coursebooks can help teachers set objectives accurate for their students' levels. This can be particularly helpful for novice teachers (Richards, 2001). Although a number of benefits are associated with coursebooks,

certain shortcomings are also emphasized. The following section attempts to highlight the potential limitations of coursebooks.

## **Limitations of Coursebooks**

Coursebooks are designed based on a cohesive structure with sound organization and easy-to-identify principles (Tomlinson, 2013). However, since coursebook contents are standardized for the use of the majority, it is unlikely that any design can address all needs of individual learners. Thus, the structured and cohesive nature of coursebooks can make the process of teaching and studying tedious and wearisome (Howard, 2001).

Cunningsworth (1995) argues that if coursebooks become the primary source of teaching and learning, teachers' reliance may lead to lack of variety in teaching procedures and thus, a decline in student motivation. Furthermore, coursebooks often include inauthentic language, ready-made texts and tasks graded to match the level of students (Richards, 2001). In other words, discourse features used in coursebooks may be different than that of a real conversation. Thus, students may experience communication difficulties when they face real life situations.

Richards (2001) suggests coursebooks often attempt to depict an idealized world and avoid genuine representation of real world issues. Although keeping contents positive and peaceful may be useful to avoid confrontations, it is also essential to urge students to think critically and voice their opinions without hesitation. In this regard, teachers may need to take the initiative to introduce different perspectives on issues objectively and encourage students to express their views.

The issue is not whether using a coursebook is a good idea or not but rather how coursebooks are used in ESL classrooms. As Prodromou (2002) noted, "a textbook does not teach itself" (as cited in McGrath, 2002, p. 64). Therefore, an element of adaptation is needed to enhance the effectiveness of materials. ESL materials can be best utilized with effective teaching strategies along with the collaboration of students. The following section attempts to shed light on potential benefits and challenges associated with adaptive approaches with ESL materials.

## **Flexibility with ESL Material Use**

As the previous studies indicate, coursebooks are designed to cater to the needs of the majority (Cunningsworth, 1995; McGrath, 2013; Richards, 2001; Tomlinson, 2011). Therefore, teachers may need to be selective with content and tasks to fulfill the particular needs of their students (McGrath, 2013). For example, Tomlinson (2011, p. 147) notes that "Providing opportunities to learn the language needed to participate in an interesting activity is likely to be more profitable than teaching something because it is the next teaching point in the syllabus".

However, a certain degree of autonomy may be needed to develop a flexible mindset. Voller (1997) suggests that creating an autonomous learning environment for students ultimately gives teachers the freedom to unleash their own creative potential. As Tomlinson (2008) concludes, it is possible to transform any material into an effective learning tool by adapting. Thus, teachers, with direct personal knowledge of their classroom teaching, should treat coursebooks as their servants (Cunningsworth, 1995). If coursebooks are viewed merely as a resource to borrow ideas from, teachers can have the opportunity to maximize their creative potential.

Tomlinson (2008) also argues that most learners only learn what they need and want to learn. Thus, by adapting materials, teachers can achieve more compatibility and fitness between the textbook and the teaching environment, and thus, maximize the value of the book for the benefit of their students. As a result, teachers can achieve a higher degree of learner engagement and allow themselves room to flexibly incorporate other materials to enrich their class contents.

According to McGrath (2013) certain contents of coursebooks can be modified, added or removed to fulfill the needs of the group for effective adaptation. Roger (1959), who is regarded as the founder of "learner-centered instruction", describes the premise of learner-centered instruction as "to listen to others and understand them from their own internal framework of references in order to let them open to each other and make them fully functioning human beings" (as cited in Kawamura, 2014, p. 48).

The idea of listening to others and understanding their own internal framework of references requires a different teaching attitude. Teachers no longer attempt to control the learning process. Instead, they take on the role of facilitators and provide students with an environment in which they can develop the ability to monitor and measure their own language acquisition process. Thus, flexibility may further aid the development of autonomous learning skills. In addition, when students' needs are prioritized, teachers can also find the freedom to maximize their own creative potential and inevitably reduce their reliance on coursebooks.

## Methodology

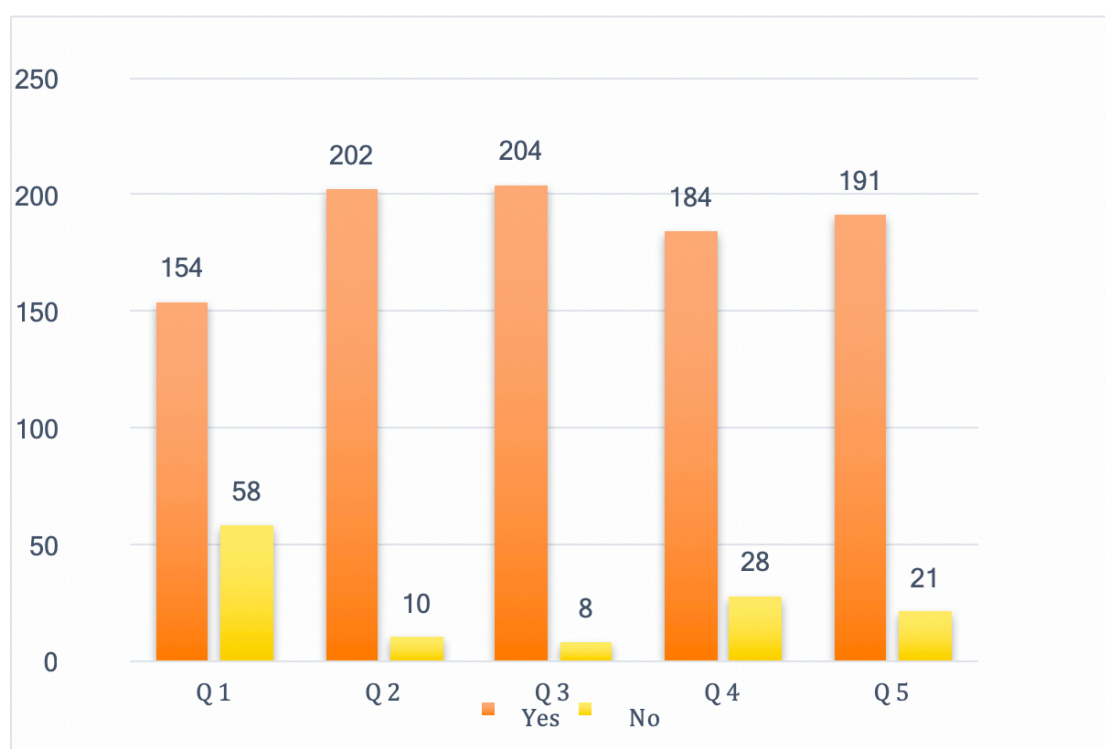
Due to the large number of student participants, the data was obtained through a survey questionnaire. Two hundred and twelve students participated from five intermediate level Japanese university ESL classes. All survey questions were explained to the classroom teachers prior to the survey. The teachers confirmed that they had supplemented their classes with additional materials such as graded readers, discussion activities, vocabulary handouts and video clips from the coursebook.

A four skills coursebook named "Global Connections" was used in all five classes. The teachers in charge suggested that they implemented communicative language teaching approaches based on learner-centered instruction. However, they also needed to complete roughly one chapter from their coursebooks per week in order to fulfill the syllabus requirement of their department. Therefore, the teachers had to dedicate half their class time for coursebook activities each week.

The questionnaire included five close-ended questions to determine students' perspectives on their teachers' use of ESL materials. The quantifiable data was useful to understand learners' expectations from their teachers regarding their material use. In addition, close-ended questions were intentionally made simple and easy-to-understand for students to avoid potential language anxiety issues.

After receiving their consent forms, all five survey questions were explained to students in English and Japanese to ensure their comprehension. Students were also given opportunities to ask for clarification. None of the teachers were involved in the data collection process to ensure the data remained uninfluenced. Students were also asked to refrain from writing any identification on survey questionnaire sheets to avoid privacy issues.

**Figure 1.0. Class Survey Results**



**Table 1.0. Class Survey Results**

Questions	Participants	Yes	No
Q1 Would you like to use a <u>coursebook</u> as the primary source of material for this class?	212	154	58
Q2 Do you find adapting <u>coursebooks</u> beneficial for your English? For example, games, vocabulary activities, discussions based on course book themes.	212	202	10
Q3 Did your teacher use any supplementary materials and/or resources in your ESL classes?	212	204	8
Q4 Did you find the supplementary materials and/or resources helpful to address your weaknesses?	212	184	28
Q5 Would you like your English teacher to incorporate supplementary materials and/or resources into your ESL class activities in the future?	212	191	21

## Data Analysis

The first question aimed to understand whether students wished to use their coursebook as the primary material. The majority of the students opted for the answer choice “Yes”. As is indicated in the literature, coursebooks can help to relieve potential language anxiety by offering a standardized structure with easy-to-follow instructions (Parrish, 2004; Richards, 2001; Tanveer, 2007). It is possible that students may have felt a sense of security when using a systematically planned and developed material (Maley & Tomlinson, 2017).

In addition, coursebooks are widely used in second language classes in Japan (King, 2013). Thus, it would be fair to assume that students may have developed a habit of using one in their EFL classes. On the other hand, fifty-eight students still opted against using a coursebook in their ESL classes. While this study does not offer a clear explanation as to why, a number of studies suggest that students may find ESL textbooks heavy and expensive (Jelala, 2011; Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2013; Smith et al., 2013). Therefore, some may not have had the urge to purchase them.

The second question attempted to understand whether students found adapting coursebook activities beneficial for their language acquisition. The responses suggest that the majority thought favorably of adaptive approaches. Teachers can adapt their coursebooks by relating coursebook activities to their students’ needs and goals. Such activities may involve games, vocabulary activities, presentations, discussions and role plays based on their coursebook contents. By tailoring the coursebook activities to students’ needs and goals, teachers can give themselves the opportunity to maximize their own creative potential.

As Tomlinson (2008) argues, most learners only learn what they need and want to learn. Therefore, it is possible to achieve the desired learning outcomes by adapting materials. In addition, students tend to learn more when they are actively engaged (Park, 2003). Thus, when the above activities are utilized in pairs and groups, learners can still remain engaged.

Courcy (2002) argues that improving oral language competence requires active engagement. Activities solely based on textbook exercises may potentially hinder student interactions and prove counter-productive. If students are not actively engaged in the process, their language acquisition may be affected negatively. As Nayar (2012, p. 119) states, “Active engagement is crucial for effective learning and for language learning. Therefore, the need to speak is essential”.

Conversely, it is possible to assume that students learn less if they become passive recipients of knowledge (Loucky & Ware, 2016). Thus, teachers play a crucial role in engaging learners in the learning process. If teachers can take an adaptive

approach with materials, they are likely to make their materials more relevant to their students and thus, enhance their learners' engagement. As a result, both learning and teaching outcomes can be improved.

The third question was asked to confirm whether students used supplementary materials and/or resources in addition to their coursebooks in their ESL classes. Two hundred and four students confirmed that their teachers incorporated supplementary materials. It is possible that the remaining eight students answered "No" either due to their lack of understanding of the concept or because they were absent from classes on days that those activities were incorporated.

The fourth question attempted to understand whether students found supplementary materials helpful to address their weaknesses. The majority thought using a variety of different materials in classes helped them improve on their weaknesses. Since different materials focus on different skills, students may have felt wide-ranging materials could have helped them gain competence in different areas. For instance, video clip activities are designed to help with listening and vocabulary while discussion questions are focused on question-asking, critical thinking, debating and other oral conversation skills.

The fifth question was asked to understand whether students preferred to use supplementary materials and/or resources in their future ESL classes. One hundred ninety-one students selected the answer "yes". Their responses support the benefits of adaptive approaches as incorporating supplementary materials can bring a new dynamic into the lesson and help students stay engaged and motivated. Since supplementary materials are specifically selected or designed by the classroom teacher, they are tailored to students' specific needs and goals.

One reason for the remaining twenty-one students selecting "No" could be due to their preference for a strict textbook-oriented approach. It is also possible that working with a number of different materials may seem overwhelming for certain individuals (Richards, 2001). Some students may also prefer to study all contents available in their coursebooks to get their money's worth. In the end, it is the teachers' responsibility to utilize ESL materials so that all students can have a meaningful learning experience regardless of the material used.

## **Conclusion**

This paper attempted to understand students' perspectives on their teachers' use of EFL materials in Japanese university foreign language classes. The results indicate that Japanese university students had a favorable opinion on adapting ESL materials. However, students still preferred to use coursebooks as the primary material in their ESL classes. In this regard, teachers' role is essential in the effective use of coursebooks.

Teachers can maximize their own creative potential by choosing to treat coursebooks as their servants instead of masters. As a result, they can make room to incorporate other materials into their class activities which can continue to capture their learners' interest and keep them motivated. However, adaptive approaches require a different teaching attitude. Teachers need to embrace their role as a facilitator and allow students freedom and control to monitor and measure their own learning. As a result, more active and student-centered learning can be accomplished even when coursebooks are used as the primary source.

## **Limitations**

As indicated in the methodology, the data was obtained only from intermediate level students. Thus, it may be useful to understand beginner and advanced level students' perspectives on their teachers' use of ESL materials. In addition, since the data was kept anonymous, it was not possible to classify the survey results based on different student attributes such as personality types, English competence, which may vary within the same level, and their past learning habits. Since coursebook dependence still stands as a common issue in ESL classes, a future study would be beneficial to understand teachers' perspectives on the subject matter as well as exploring students' reasons for their choices.

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