What is the Problem of English Education Japan?: Presenting a Case Study for Corpus-based Analysis of English Textbooks

1. Introduction

Among the problems of English language education in Japan, no other topic has created more controversy than the sufficiency of communicative skills in English. In general, it is often said that Japanese people are proficient in grammar but are not in listening and speaking abilities. In response to such growing criticism that Japanese do not have sufficient communicative skills in English, the Japanese government revised the Education Ministry guidelines and at the same time proposed a five-year "Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Activities" in 2003 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology). These innovations have two specific characteristics (Goto & Ino 2003). One is English language education in comparatively early stages, especially in junior high school. In the past ten years, the needs for effective English language education at junior high school have steadily increased. It can be speculated that this enthusiasm for English language education in early stages has taken place against old discussion-generating topics such as the background of internationalization. The other character is the pragmatic use of English. The new version of the curriculum guideline emphasizes communication skills especially listening and speaking (See below).

THE COURSE OF STUDY FOR FOREIGN LANGUAGES

. Overall Objectives

To develop students' basic practical communication abilities such as listening and speaking, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages.

(Curriculum guideline of the MEXT 2003)

English has played a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues. For children living in the 21st century, it is essential for them to acquire communication abilities in English as a common international language.

(Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Activities 2003)

As a result of these innovative trends toward pragmatic English education at an early stage, all English textbooks for junior high school students were revised in 2006. Newly edited versions put more focus on communicative skills than the old ones.

The aim of this paper is to analyze each English textbook used in Japanese junior high schools and to demonstrate how much the current Japanese reforms in English language education have an influence on actual education, comparing English written in textbooks with English used in actual scenes. At the end, this paper will present better guidance plan of teaching English to Japanese-speaking people.

2. Why are Japanese not good at communication in English?

It is often said that Japanese people are not good at communication in English. Many Japanese students cannot speak English well, even though they achieved high scores on grammar tests. According to the TOEFL test score data in 2003, Japanese average scores are well below the average of all countries in each section except for the grammar section. In addition, total average score ranking of Japanese is 248 out of 259 all countries.

How could such a thing happen? There are three reasons. The first reason is the popularization of the TOEFL test in Japan (Goto & Ino 2003). In other words, a wide range of people take the TOEFL test in Japan, while in some countries, only a limited number of elite-track people can take this test. For example, the number of Japanese applicants for the TOEFL CBT in 2003 was 81,749 while that of China was 24,075 (Refer to the table1).

Table1. TEFL CBT Total Score of Asian Countries in 2003

Country	The number of applicants	Score
Japan	81,749	188
Singapore	387	254
India	62,151	246
Pakistan	3,272	233
Philippines	16,920	229
Malaysia	2,626	226
Kyrgyzstan	178	222
China	24,075	213
South Korea	86,188	209

The second reason is the lack of similarity between Japanese language and English language. Because Japanese language has different linguistic roots from English, it is more difficult for Japanese-speaking people to learn English than people who speak a language of Indo-European language family. In fact, the TOEFL scores in European countries are far higher than those of Asian countries.

The third reason is the English education system in Japan. Many schools in Japan put an emphasis only on English grammar. On the other hand, most countries throughout the world focus not only on grammatical skills but also on communicative skills. It is because English has played a central role as the common international language in linking people who have different mother tongues.

3. English textbooks in Japan

In such a situation, the enthusiasm for English language education focused on communicative skills has grown, and six versions of English textbooks for secondary school education were published in Japan in 2006. All six versions were revised in 2006 in response to a series of innovation of English language education as previously noted. Each school has sole discretion on which textbook to use for instruction. In this paper, all the textbooks are investigated, but the objects of the main analysis are newly revised versions.

Table2. Previous versions (2003)

THE TITLE OF TEXTBOOK IN JAPAN	PUBLISHER	CIRCULATION	SCHOOLS USING (%)
New Horizon	Tokyo-shoseki	1,510,517	40,8
SunShine English	Kairyudo-shuppan	828,463	22,4
New Crown	Sanseido	826,363	22,3
Total English	Gakkou-tosho	297,194	8,0

One World	Kyouiku-shuppan	142,812	3,9
Columbus 21	Mitsumura-tosho	78,044	2,1
Total active.comm	Shubunkan	17,943	0,5

Table3. New edited versions (2006)

THE TITLE OF TEXTBOOK IN JAPAN	PUBLISHER	CIRCYLATION	SCHOOLS USING (%)
New Horizon	Tokyo-shoseki	1,575,372	42,5
SunShine English	Kairyudo-shuppan	802,856	21,0
New Crown	Sanseido	761,139	20,5
Total English	Gakkou-tosho	323,054	8,7
One World	Kyouiku-shuppan	177,664	4,8
Columbus 21	Mitsumura-tosho	69,040	1,9
Total active.comm	Shubunkan	0	0

4. Methodology

4.1. Corpus-based analysis

Corpus, a large body of naturally occurring computer-readable texts or text-extracts (Leech 1992) will be used in this research. The corpus (plural: corpora) can be defined as a body or collection of linguistic data for use in scholarship and research (Leech 1992). Many linguists have used corpora in their linguistic research, and have defined what a corpus is of their own accord. According to Francis (1982), the founder of corpus linguistics, a corpus is a collection of texts assumed to be representative of a given language, dialect, or other subset of a language to be used for linguistic analysis. Other linguists, Johansson (1991) also said that a corpus is a body of texts put together in principled way, often for the purposes of linguistic research. In this analysis, the most oft-quoted Leech and Fligelstone's following definition is adopted.

Computer corpora are, especially, bodies of natural language material (whole texts, samples of texts, or sometimes unconnected sentences) which are stored in machine readable form. … It should be added that computer corpora are rarely haphazard collections of textual material: they are generally assembled with particular purposes in mind, and are often assumed to be (informally speaking) representative of some language or that type.   (Leech and Fligelstone 1992)

Moreover, according to Leech (1992), the corpus-based analysis has following four characteristics.

(1) Focus on linguistic performance, rather than competence

(2) Focus on linguistic description, rather than linguistic universals

(3) Focus on quantitative, as well as qualitative models of language

(4) Focus on a more empiricist, rather than rationalist view of scientific inquiry

In this research, we will use two corpora and compare them in terms of the occurrence frequency of auxiliary modals, for modality is one of the most difficult concepts for Japanese-speaking English leaner (Murcia & Freeman 2004).

4.2. British National Corpus

One of the corpora used in this research is the British National Corpus (BNC). It is a 100-million-word text corpus containing samples of written and spoken English from a wide range of sources. It can be divided into two parts: one is the BNC-spoken and the other is the BNC-written. In this case study, the former corpus will be used because the target of this research is spoken English. The BNC-spoken contains transcriptions of spontaneous natural conversations made by members of the public.

4.3. English textbook corpus

On the other hand, in order to compare two types of English, English which is spoken by native speakers and English taught in a classroom for instruction, corpora of English textbooks are also needed. These English textbook corpora are scanned from each textbook and stored in machine-readable form. At this time, the following textbooks used by 80% of all schools in Japan will be used for research.

New Horizon 1-3 2006 Tokyo: Tokyo-shoseki

Sunshine English 1-3. 2006 Tokyo: Kairyudo-shuppan

New Crown 1-3 2006 Tokyo: Sanseido

4.4. Comparison of occurrence frequency of modal auxiliaries

In this research, the above-referenced corpora will be compared in terms of the occurrence frequency of modal auxiliaries (*1). This is because modal auxiliaries are said to be one of the most difficult grammatical concepts for Japanese to learn. According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (2003), the reason why Japanese are not good at using modal auxiliaries is that Japanese language does not have modal auxiliaries.

Modal auxiliaries are among the more difficult structures ESL/EFL teachers to deal with. Some of your students, who have been told time and time again that present-tense verbs with third person singular subjects require an –s ending, overgeneralize this rule to modals… Another source of difficulty with the form of modals, of course, may be your students' native language(s). Not all languages have modal auxiliaries.   (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 2003)

(*1) The statistical software used in this research is Oxford WordSmith Tools 4.0.

Modal auxiliaries (will, would, can, could, should, must, may, shall, and others) in four following corpora were compared.

1. BNC   (as a corpus of English spoken by native speakers)

2. Textbook Corpus (a) New Horizon (as a corpus of English taught in a classroom)

3. Textbook Corpus (b) Sunshine   (as a corpus of English taught in a classroom)

4. Textbook Corpus (c) New Crown (as a corpus of English taught in a classroom)

5. Results & Discussion

As a result, there are wide differences between the four corpora in terms of the modal auxiliaries "would" and "can" (See accompanying table). The occurrence frequency of "would" in BNC is predominantly the highest of all corpora. The supposable cause is that British people prefer to use "would" in sentences (Chambers 1995). On the other hand, the occurrence frequency of "can" in the three textbooks' corpora is higher than that in BNC. It is because the auxiliary verb "can" is taught over and over again in Japanese junior high schools.

## Table4. The Occurrence Frequency of Modal Auxiliaries (%)
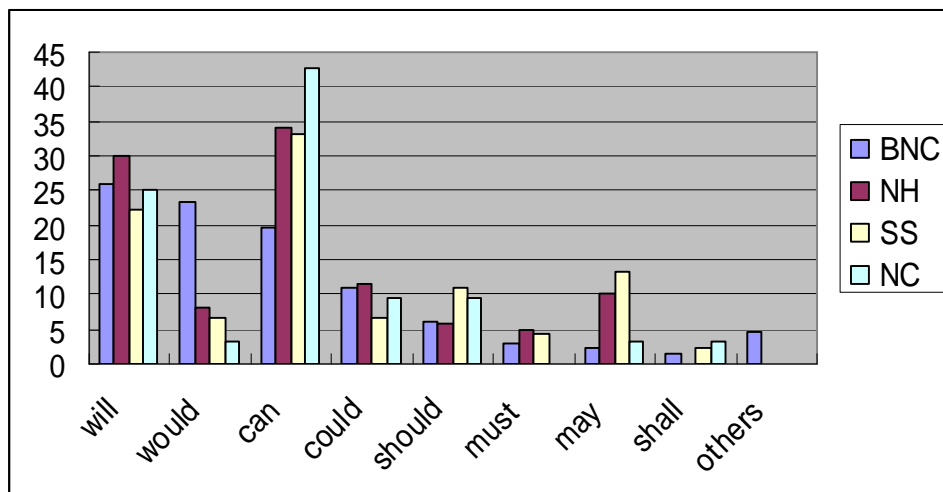
In addition, it is notable that "can" is taught in a classroom almost as a meaning of "ability". According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman's grammar book (2003), the functions of "can" can be divided into four parts.

1) Ability for animate subjects   e.g. I can speak Indonesian.

2) Potentiality for inanimate subjects   e.g. This business can be reorganized.

3) Making general requests   e.g. Can you help me with this math problem?

4) Making requests for permission   e.g.   Can I leave the room now?

In reference to this classification, usages of "can" of two types of corpora (BNC and the textbooks' corpora) are sorted into four different types noted above. Here are the results.

The Classification of "can" in BNC
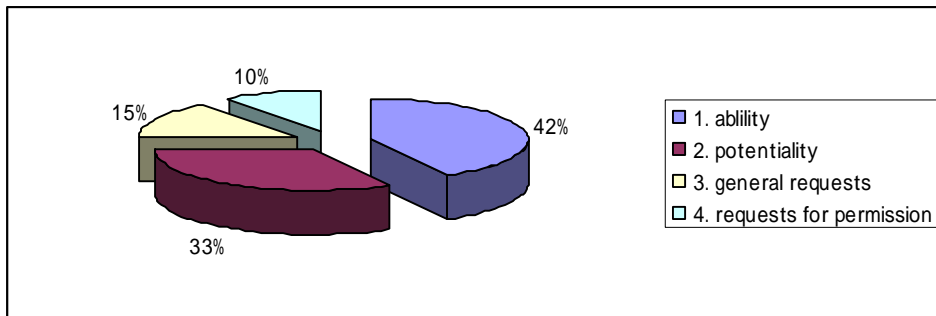
The Classification of "can" in the textbooks' corpora
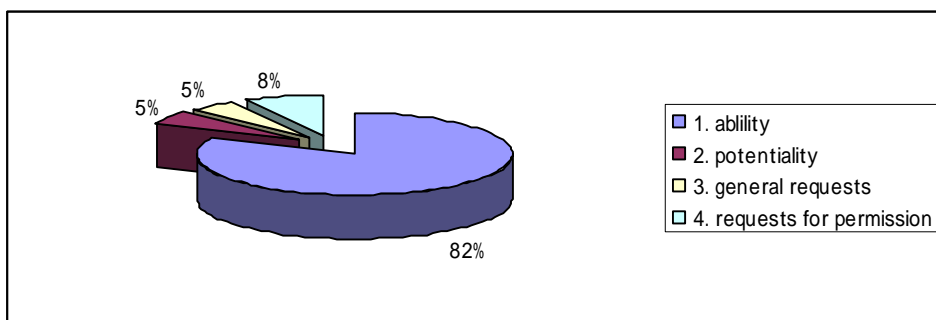
The distribution of the usage of "can" in BNC is well-balanced, while that in textbooks' corpora places a disproportionate emphasis on the usage of ability for animate subjects. This fact can be backed by data that English learners in Japan rarely

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use "can" for representing the potentiality for inanimate subjects (Huddleston & Pullum 2005). This is one of the usages at which Japanese are not as strong.

On the whole, these results tell us that there is a sharp line drawn between English spoken by native speakers and English taught in the classroom. As long as there are some differences between the two, it can be speculated that acquisition of proper communicative skills in English is almost impossible. What is needed now is to bring English in the classroom closer to English spoken by native speakers.

6. Conclusion

In the 21st century, globalization in various fields has advanced rapidly, and each individual has more and more opportunities to participate in international activities. In such a situation, English has played a central role as an international language more than ever. Unfortunately, however, many Japanese are restricted in their exchanges with foreigners due to their lack of sufficient communicative abilities in English. What is needed now is improvement of English teaching methods and course materials.

This study revealed that English taught in Japan is quite different from English spoken by native speakers in terms of modal auxiliaries. In order to enhance Japanese people's communicative skills in English, English in textbooks must be closer to practical English.

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