

# Western-Published Versus MEXT-Mandated: A Comparative Textbook Analysis

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## Introduction

Although the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has introduced policies to encourage communicative language teaching (CLT) in schools (Tahira, 2012), studies indicate that many Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) have continued to follow the *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) tradition (Kikuchi & Browne, 2009; Nishino, 2011; K. Sato & Kleinsasser, 2004). Studies have indicated that the highly structured form-focused content of MEXT-mandated textbooks hinders CLT (Kobayakawa, 2011; McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005; Rosenkjar, 2009).

Despite these claims by scholars, there has been a lack of research to compare MEXT-mandated textbooks with CLT-oriented alternatives. Such a comparison of different materials can allow the discussion to move beyond simple criticism of the status quo.

Unlike regular schools, Japanese colleges of technology (*kōsen*) may use textbooks that are not authorized by MEXT (Humphries, 2011). At the *kosen*, where this study was conducted, while the tenth graders continued using a MEXT-mandated textbook, new materials from a British publisher were introduced for grades 11 and 12. In order to understand the change in teaching and learning procedures expected from this change in textbooks,

this study contains an analysis of the two textbooks.

## Literature Review

### *MEXT-Mandated textbooks: Failure to Follow Guidelines*

All public secondary school teachers must use textbooks authorized by MEXT (R. Sato, 2010). Since 1989, MEXT policies have claimed to focus on improving the communicative competence of students (Tahira, 2012).

Early studies showed that the textbooks did not follow the guidelines set out in 1989. Gorsuch (1999) analyzed the six best-selling MEXT-mandated textbooks. She noted that: (1) any speaking and writing is “highly scripted,” (2) students are “not called upon to express their own ideas,” and (3) “language is viewed as a system of grammatical forms, vocabulary items, and phonetic sounds, best studied through a perusal of discrete words and sentences” (Gorsuch, 1999, p. 9). She concluded that “the textbooks are a hindrance to teachers who want to teach students how to communicate in English” (Gorsuch, 1999, p. 9). Moreover, the teachers’ manuals contain detailed lesson plans “emphasizing translation and drill-focused teaching techniques” (Browne & Wada, 1998, p. 105). A study by LoCastro (1997) found a lack of contextual details and noted that “forms or patterns are presented without any attention to their communicative function” (p. 254). Moreover, the passages contain unnatural sentences (Pacek, 1996).

More recent studies have indicated that textbooks have continued in the same vein. Based on an analysis of a textbook unit that contained a passage about an American cartoon, Rosenkjar (2009) found that the exercises were “almost exclusively form-focused” (p. 66). He concluded, “the unit gives the strong impression that the real purpose of the reading is to provide

examples of the target grammatical material rather than communicate something interesting about [the cartoon's creator] Charles Shultz and [his cartoon] *Peanuts*" (Rosenkjar, 2009, p. 67).

Kobayakawa (2011) analyzed the writing exercises from five publishers of best-selling MEXT-mandated textbooks. She noted that these materials tended to emphasize translation and controlled writing exercises such as question-answer, gap filling and sentence ordering. In contrast, communication-oriented "guided writing and free writing tasks are under-represented in all of the textbooks analyzed" (Kobayakawa, 2011, p. 42)

McGroarty and Taguchi (2005) analyzed five of the best-selling *Oral Communication A* textbooks approved by MEXT. They noted that most exercises focused on mechanical operations that required highly structured responses: "only three speaking activities out of 218 were manipulative functions practiced more creatively, such as role-playing" (McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005, p. 218). Moreover, communicative settings were limited to the school and classroom, and most of the dialogues contained direct, casual interactions between friends and/or family. The researchers stated, "the textbooks' limited range of situations and exercise types constrains the possible development of students' abilities to communicate outside the classroom" (McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005, p. 222).

Despite the wide range of studies described above that criticize the MEXT-mandated textbooks, there has been no research to date that compares them to a communicative-oriented alternative.

## Method

### ***Context***

The study took place at a rural *kōsen* where, after graduating from a five-year course, the engineering students could choose to (a) transfer into the junior year of university without an English entrance test, (b) find employment, or (c) study for an in-house bachelor's degree. The principal and the dean of the human science faculty decided that the English department needed to introduce a new curriculum with a greater emphasis on communication. Consequently, the English teachers discussed and selected new textbooks.

### ***Textbooks***

The *kosen* used a MEXT-approved textbook *Vivid English Course (New Edition) I* (Minamimura et al., 2006) for Grade 10 and introduced two new textbooks, *On the Go* (Gershon, Mares, & Walker, 2004a) and *On the Move* (Gershon, Mares, & Walker, 2004b), for grades 11 and 12, respectively. For simplicity, these textbooks are referred to as *Vivid*, *OTG* and *OTM*.

### ***Textbook Analysis Framework***

The textbooks and supplementary materials (for example, listening CDs and teacher's manuals) were analyzed using the framework designed by Littlejohn (1998). The framework follows three levels, which "move from a consideration of the more easily identifiable aspects to the more abstract and complex" (Littlejohn, 1998, p. 195).

Focusing on the most visible aspects of the materials, the first level (see Littlejohn, 1998, pp. 196-197) asks: *What is there?* The categories are (a)

target groups of users, (b) stated aims, (c) balance of information, and (d) chapter-focused analysis. The chapter-focused analysis concentrates on the main instructional requirements in randomly selected mid-point chapters<sup>1</sup>: *Unit 8 and Review 2* (in *OTM*) and *Lesson 6 and Review 3* (in *Vivid*).

Level 2 (see Littlejohn, 1998, pp. 198-201) deepens the focus on the selected chapters and asks: *What is required of users?* The analysis for this level identified 15 activities for the *OTM* chapters and 22 for *Vivid*. The activities are then categorized according to what the users (teacher and students) are expected to do, and the percentage of activities is calculated to reveal trends for each user requirement. Table 1 shows the categories and samples of user requirements found in this study.

Table 1. Level 2 Categories of Analysis

Category	Sample User Requirements
Focus	<i>Meaning</i> or <i>Form</i>
Mental Operations	<i>Build Text</i> or <i>Decode Semantic Meaning</i>
Turn Taking	<i>Initiate</i> or <i>Respond</i>
With Whom?	<i>Pair Work</i> or <i>Individually</i>
Information Source	<i>Materials</i> or <i>Learners</i>
Learner Input	<i>Graphic</i> or <i>Written</i>
Learner Output	<i>Oral</i> or <i>Written</i>
Nature of Content	<i>Personal Information</i> or <i>Metalinguistic Knowledge</i>

Building on the foundation laid in the previous two levels, the Level 3 analysis (see Littlejohn, 1998, pp. 201-202) poses the question: *What is implied?* In this study, the following categories emerged for discussion: (a) *Congruity of Stated Aims and Underlying Values*, (b) *Principles of Selection and Sequencing*, (c) *Teacher and Learner Roles*, (d) *Use of Knowledge*, (e)

*Development of Study Skills, and (f) Social Values.*

### ***The Analyst***

Despite my attempts to be objective in this study, my background may influence the analysis. At the time of the study, I taught communicative-oriented classes at the *kōsen* using my own materials. I believe that there is no best method for teaching but teachers should use principled approaches that suit the students in their context.

## Findings and Discussion

### ***Textbook Analysis Level 1***

#### *Target Groups*

The two textbooks target different groups of learners. *Vivid* is the most specific in terms of the geographical and institutional population, because it aims for Japanese high school students in grade 10. *OTM* is more specific in terms of the learners' target English level: *lower intermediate*. In Japan, this latter textbook is mainly used in language schools and universities, which is not surprising, because the government ministry mandates the use of certain approved books such as *Vivid* in public secondary schools. Geographically, *OTM* targets East Asian learners.

#### *Stated Aims*

Both textbooks assert that they (a) aim to improve learners' communication skills and (b) develop their awareness of different cultures. *Vivid's* main claim is that it follows the government guidelines, but it also states that it has topics that (a) match the interests of Japanese students, (b) relate to their

daily life, and (c) make them more socially aware. *OTM* claims to be theme-based and functional. It also states that it develops the necessary practical skills to survive in situations relating to overseas travel, work and study.

### *Balance of Information*

Concerning the balance of information between the teachers and the learners, *Vivid* gives the control to the teachers. The teacher's pack is extensive, providing detailed translations, lesson plans, language explanations and answers. The listening CD pack is separate from both the teacher's guidance pack and the students' books, suggesting that this skill has a low priority. *OTM* allows self-study, because learners receive the CD, transcripts, and all the necessary information for them to study independently. However, the teacher has access to an additional CD, sample tests and suggestions for expansion.

### *Chapter-Focused Analysis*

In the analyzed chapters, clear differences arose in the use of reading and listening input, speaking exercises, images and linguistic instruction. *Vivid* devotes the majority of its pages to reading and this section appears before the students' exercises. While reading, teachers are encouraged to draw the learners' attention to various grammatical areas. Near the end of the chapter, there is a page entitled *Communication*. However, none of the subsections can facilitate creative and open communication; instead, they contain multiple-choice and gap-filling exercises. *OTG* also has many highly structured activities, but sections such as *Warm Up* ask for students' personal opinions and information, and *Role Play* requires them to make their own loosely structured dialogues.

*OTM* supplies the main reading activity (*Travel Guide*) at the end of each chapter. It does not practice any linguistic structures, but instead extends the theme of the chapter with advice and real-world information. Listening is central to *OTM*, because it uses this mode to introduce key information to the learners. This is in contrast to *Vivid*, where listening is peripheral to reading. Both books use color photographs and cartoons. However, only *OTM* uses the images to directly convey the process of what is happening in the text. *Vivid* prefers to use images to show circumstantial information.

### ***Textbook Analysis Level 2***

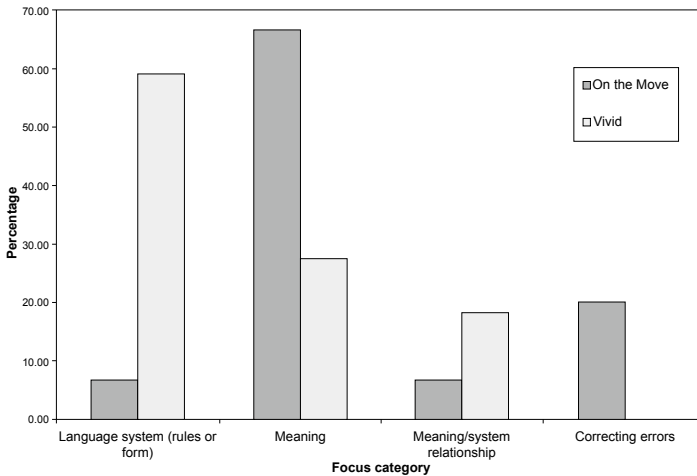


Figure 1. Comparative focuses

Figure 1 indicates the focuses of the materials. *OTM* concentrates predominantly on meaning. While *Vivid* does not neglect this area, it emphasizes the language system. In *OTM*, three activities (20%) encourage learners to focus on *correcting errors*, but it is unclear whether this type of



error-correction would draw their attention to meaning or form; therefore, it is a separate category.

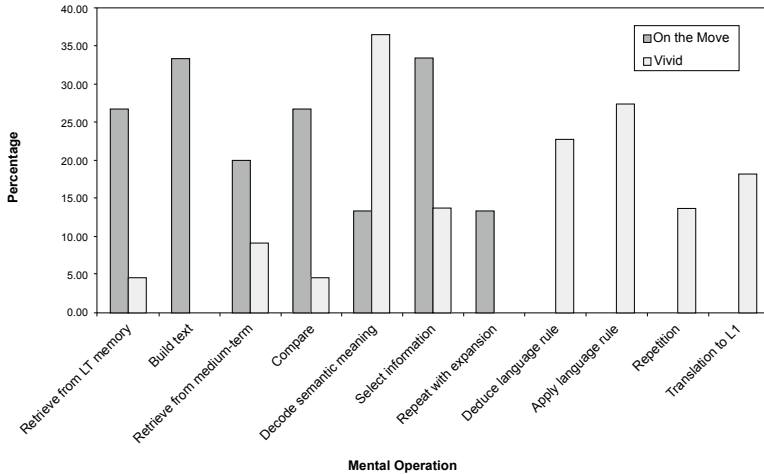


Figure 2. Comparison of Mental Operations

Regarding the range of mental operations, *Vivid* has nine types of activities and *OTM* has seven (Figure 2). *Vivid's* extra activities focus on language rules, repetition and translation. In contrast, *OTM* has two creative output activities not contained in *Vivid*, which require students to *build text* and *repeat with expansion*. *OTM* also requires users to access language from their long- and medium-term memories<sup>2</sup> more frequently. Despite *OTM's* meaning-focus in the output, it has a lower proportion of activities that require decoding the semantic meaning of the input.

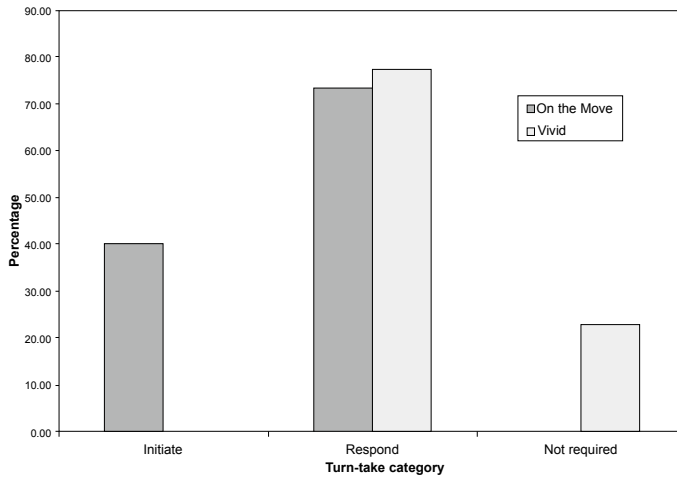


Figure 3. Comparison of turn taking

Both textbooks mainly required the students to respond to the teacher, their peers or the materials (Figure 3). *OTM* has a high proportion of activities that encourage learners to initiate discourse. *Vivid* contains five activities that do not require any student responses to the teacher or the textbook.

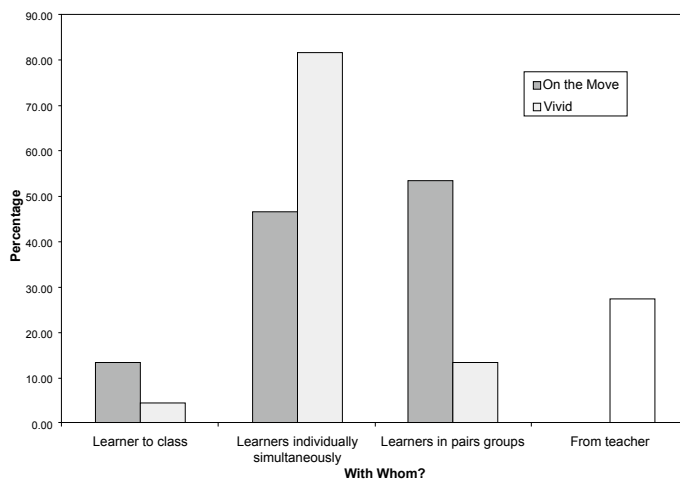


Figure 4 Comparison of “with whom?”

Figure 4 indicates *with whom* the students interact. *Vivid* encourages learners to work individually simultaneously. *OTM* also has many activities that require this type of individual work, but it has a higher proportion of exercises that require pair- and group work.

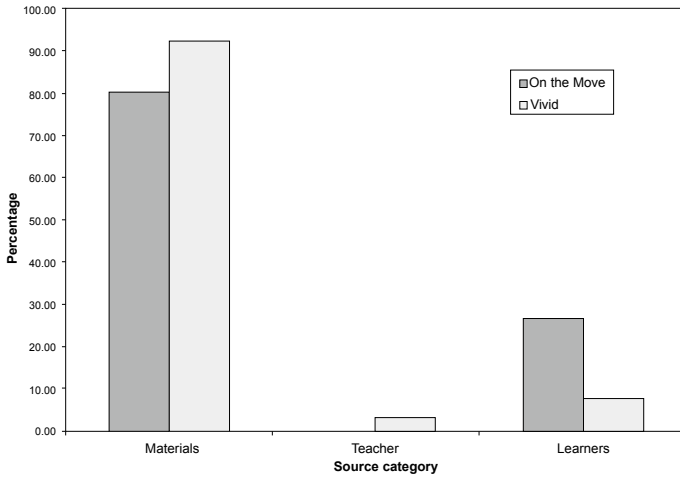


Figure 5. Comparison of information sources

The materials are the main source of information for both textbooks (Figure 5); however, *OTM* uses students' personal experiences as a source more frequently than *Vivid*, and they can study without the teacher. Considering the teacher as the source of information, these graph data are misleading for *Vivid*, because he or she may opt to supplement the learners' textbooks by conveying information suggested in the Manual.

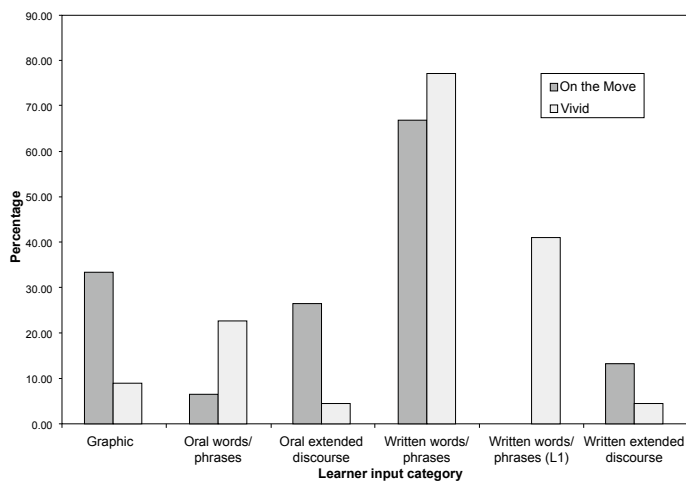


Figure 6. Comparison of learner inputs

As shown in Figure 6, the main input for both textbooks came in the form of *written words and phrases*<sup>3</sup>. However, regarding *Vivid*, these data are misleading, because *written extended discourse* appears to be lower than *OTM*. In reality, although this reading exercise is counted once using the Littlejohn (1998) framework, it actually encompasses half the chapter. Regarding the use of the L1, *Vivid* uses Japanese words and phrases in the input, but *OTM* uses them only in optional resource sections: an end-of-book glossary and a detachable phrase book. Aside from written words and phrases, both textbooks use oral input. *Vivid* tends to use proportionately more oral activities that are limited to words and phrases; *OTM* focuses instead on extended oral discourse supported by images.

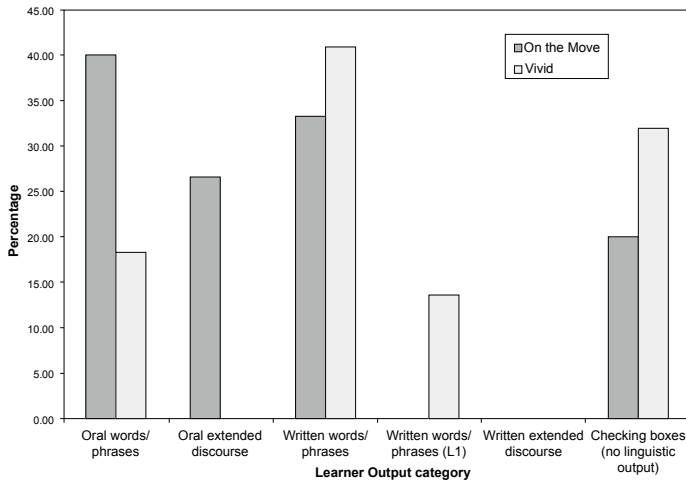


Figure 7. Comparison of learner outputs

Although both textbooks emphasize a low degree of writing output (Figure 7), *OTM* contains activities that require extended oral discourse. *Vivid* requires less speaking and arguably less English production in general, partly because it entails some activities that focus on L1 language production.

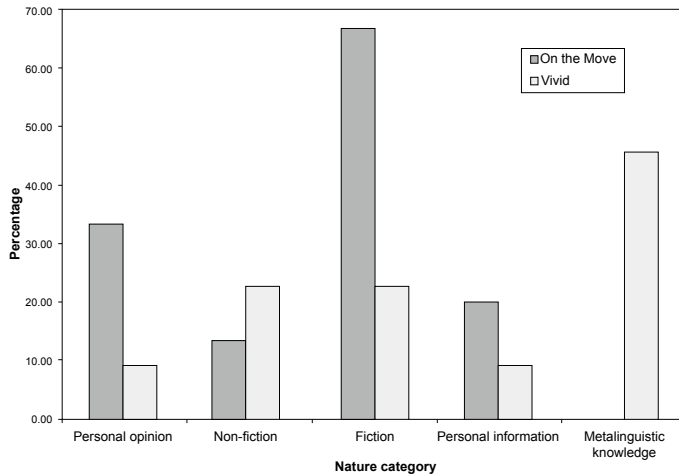


Figure 8. Comparison of the nature of the content

While the nature of the content is mainly *metalinguistic knowledge* in *Vivid*, *OTM* does not describe language elements. *Vivid*'s content balances between non-fiction and fiction, but *OTM* follows fictional characters, a feature which is reflected in these results. *OTM* has a stronger emphasis on the student than *Vivid*, because it focuses on students' personal opinions and information.

### ***Textbook Analysis Level 3***

#### *Congruity of Stated Aims and Underlying Values*

*OTM* tends to follow its claims. It does introduce a variety of overseas situations related to work, travel and living; it does focus on functional communication skills; and it is likely to develop new perspectives for the learners. However, *Vivid* does not systematically follow its stated aims. The book claims that it (a) introduces the four skills in an integrated manner, (b)

contains topics that match students' interests and daily life and increase social awareness, and (c) facilitates free interaction. In reality, however, (a) reading is the only skill strongly practiced, (b) it presents the moral and scientific beliefs of the authors in a factual manner, and (c) most of the activities are highly structured.

### *Principles of Selection and Sequencing*

*Vivid* follows a linear structural syllabus that incrementally increases the difficulty level of the grammar, vocabulary and content. Within the chapters, it uses an extensive reading section containing the target vocabulary and grammar. Exercises and explicit grammatical instruction then develop the language from the reading section. *OTM* does not teach grammatical structures; instead, learners can select chapters and their sequence based on the communicative situations.

### *Teacher and Learner Roles*

*Vivid* supplies the teacher with a vast amount of information, which is not included in the students' books. This orientation is intentional, because it allows the teacher to present the information to the learners before they begin to practice the target structures. In contrast, the students' book for *OTM* contains all the necessary information for self-study and understanding what types of answers are expected. The teacher's role for this latter textbook can be to act as a facilitator, and to supply extension activities.

### *The Use of Knowledge*

For both textbooks, the knowledge presented to the learners is quite general, rather than specialized, but *Vivid* is more technical in terms of



grammatical instruction. It tends to introduce knowledge in a factual manner, but *OTM* attempts to elicit opinions from the users and introduces more than one perspective into many reading activities.

### *Development of Study Skills*

*Vivid* focuses on grammar-translation skills and language drills. It therefore tends to focus on the cognitive reproduction of instructed areas, rather than problem solving. *OTM* also contains activities that focus on cognitive reproduction, and it does not focus explicitly on learning skills. However, it has many activities that encourage learners to work together to solve problems and communicate to find information.

### *Social Values*

*Vivid* transmits scientific and moralistic wisdom without room for discussion or reflection. *OTM* appears to encourage overseas experiences and seems to assume that the learners have some degree of overseas travel experience.

### *Discussion*

The comparative analysis using the Littlejohn framework showed deep differences in the values that underlie the textbooks (Table 2). *Vivid* works within a transmission-based paradigm (Wedell, 2003): The aim is for the teacher to give knowledge related to the extended reading passages and provide the correct answers to the textbook drills. Moreover, this textbook is weighted towards the *yakudoku* approach: The teachers have detailed Japanese translations and each chapter focuses on selected language structures. Therefore, the nature of *Vivid* reinforces the findings of other

Table 2. Summary of Textbook Orientations

Vivid: Transmission-based paradigm ( <i>yakudoku</i> approach)	OTG/OTM: Interpretation-based paradigm (CLT approach)
- <i>Teacher-centred knowledge</i> . Extensive teacher's pack. Knowledge withheld from learners.	- <i>Learner-centred knowledge</i> . Learners' books contain necessary info for self-study.
- <i>Reading comprehension emphasis</i> . Passages dominant. Teachers have full translations and further info.	- <i>4-skills integrated</i> . Opportunities for extended speaking, reading and listening, but writing limited to words and phrases.
- <i>High structure exercises</i> . Only one correct answer (from teacher's pack).	- <i>Low structure exercises</i> . Students can create meaning from the text.
- <i>Form-focused exercises</i> . Drills practise pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax.	- <i>Meaning-focused exercises</i> . Activities require students to share meanings and construct their own answers.
- <i>Instructions and explanations in Japanese</i> .	- <i>Instructions and explanations in target language (English)</i> .
- <i>Linear progression</i> . Vocabulary and sentence structures increase in difficulty.	- <i>Self-contained chapters</i> . Users can select route through textbook.
- <i>Knowledge transferred as facts without room for negotiation</i> .	- <i>Learners requested to share opinions about the content</i> .

studies of MEXT-mandated textbooks (Browne & Wada, 1998; Gorsuch, 1999; Kobayakawa, 2011; LoCastro, 1997; McGroarty & Taguchi, 2005; Pacek, 1996; Rosenkjar, 2009). In contrast, *OTM* and *OTG* orient towards the interpretation-based paradigm (Wedell, 2003): Students can use the textbooks without the teacher, and the content encourages them to express their opinions and relate the content to their own experience. The strength of the CLT orientation could be challenged, because the new textbooks contain some structured, low-output activities and the texts are *pseudo-authentic*

(simplified to simulate communicative situations and functions). Nevertheless, *OTG* and *OTM* contain activities that encourage students to use language for meaning. Therefore, although *Vivid* is the MEXT-approved textbook, *OTG* and *OTM* orient more closely to the CLT policies that the Ministry has espoused.

Despite the failure of *Vivid* to follow its CLT claims, interrelated studies, based on classroom observations and interviews at the *kosen*, indicate that this textbook may suit the Japanese context more than *OTG/OTM*. The teachers lacked the training and support to implement the textbooks communicatively and found problems due to sociocultural differences inherent in the exercises (Humphries, in press). As a result, they adapted the new textbooks to the *yakudoku* approach. They conducted the classes in Japanese, translated the listening transcripts, avoided loosely structured exercises and focused on lexicogrammatical explanations (Humphries, 2012). From the students' perspective, they had few opportunities to use English, but when asked questions, they tended to stay silent, wait for the teacher to provide the answer, or opted to reply in Japanese (Humphries & Stroupe, in press).

In general, textbooks tend to contain compromises as the publishers and authors strive to create publications that appeal to a wide range of users. The new textbooks in this study, although targeted at East Asia, contained learning values oriented towards British, North American and Australasian (BANA) learning institutions (Holliday, 1994). Moreover, in Japan, the language schools and universities that use these books contain students with different goals to high school students. Replacing the traditional MEXT-mandated textbooks with BANA alternatives will not provide an effective solution. Instead, JTEs need better training to understand the principles

underlying the construction of textbooks. From this knowledge, they can adapt MEXT textbooks or supplement them with their own materials that are designed for the needs of their contexts and their students.

### Notes

- 1 Littlejohn (1998) does not elucidate the reasons for choosing a mid-point chapter. However, many textbooks tend to increase in complexity in a linear fashion. In the case of *Vivid*, the first chapter contained simple introductory exercises, but the final chapter was unique. It contained an exercise that asked students to debate organ transplants, which differed considerably from the transmission-based style in the other chapters.
- 2 Based on Littlejohn's framework, retrieval from short-term memory involves a matter of seconds. Medium-term memory is recall from the same chapter. Long-term memory requires drawing on information before studying the chapter.
- 3 Text that is 50 words or less.

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