

Changes in High School English Education : A Comparison of Popular English Textbooks

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Abstract

This article discusses how the policy on high school English education has changed from grammar-oriented education by looking at the change in the Course of Study, the official guidelines published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. The Course of Study, enforced by law, influences education greatly. Most textbooks are written based on the guidelines, and screened by the government. Textbooks indicate what education students should receive. Therefore, a questionnaire was taken of 200 first-year students at universities to investigate what textbooks they used at high school. The results show that *Unicorn* and *Crown* are frequently used. These two textbooks that reflect the latest Course of Study and the old version of *Unicorn* are compared to give university English teachers information about English education their students have experienced at high school.

Keywords: English education, High school, Course of Study, Textbooks, Changes

Introduction

Have you noticed variety in the strength of your students' English abilities? In the past, what students knew was fairly similar across the board, regardless of their personal feelings toward English and where they came from. They were good at grammar and translating, which were basically all that they had learned at junior and senior high school. I myself experienced that kind of education, examining the grammar of each sentence in a reading passage and carefully translating it into Japanese. No matter who I had a class with, what I was told to do was the same. I do not remember having listening exercises or practicing communicating in English. However, the situation now seems to be different. I have got the impression for the past few years that more students are good at speaking and have strong listening skills, but have weaker grammar. I have had quite a few students who did not understand grammar points that I was thoroughly taught when I was a student. When I asked them if they studied grammar in high school, they answered "Not much."

In fact, according to the research by Yoshimura, Shojima, Sugino, Nozawa, Shimizu,

Saito, Negishi, Okabe and Fraser in 2005, some students now do not seem to be able to answer grammar questions that students before used to be able to answer correctly. The researchers conducted an IRT equating of grammar and vocabulary section of National Center Test “English” to discuss the trend of academic achievement of English from 1990 to 2004. They reported that the average scores of the section dropped in 1997 and remained lower after that compared to those before 1997. The Center Test does not measure all skills of English and it is taken only by one group of students, that is, students who intend to go on to university. However, the result of this research indicates something has changed in high school English education.

It is important for teachers to know what students have experienced before entering university and take advantage of it to teach them effectively and to motivate them to study English further. This article discusses how English education has changed at high school in recent years, as well as some implications of what lecturers at universities can expect freshmen to have learned at high school by looking at popular high school English textbooks.

Changes in High School Education

The changes that have taken place at high school can be seen in the Course of Study, which decides the amount of learning, the content of learning and the content of textbooks (Ema, 2002). The Course of Study for high school was first introduced in 1947 (Serizawa, 1981), and revisions were officially announced in 1951, 1955, 1970, 1978, 1989 and 1998. It was dramatically revised in 1989 when the Japanese education turned to *yutori kyoiku* (less strenuous education). As it is widely known, English teaching in Japan strictly followed the grammar-translation method for a long time. However, textbooks that were centered on grammar were abolished in this Course of Study (Suwabe, Mochizuki & Shirahata, 1997), and English has started being taught in a more communicative way. In this 1989 guideline, which went into effect in 1991, the number of grammatical items and sentence structures which should be studied at junior high school was reduced to 13 from 21 and to 22 from 33 respectively. Those that were removed were to be learned at high school (Suwabe et al.). This meant that the total amount of grammar that students should learn at junior and senior high school became less than in the previous Course of Study.

Theory and practice often do not match, but the result of the research by Yoshimura et al. (2005) implies that theory has had some influence on practice. The research found that the drop of the average scores of grammar and vocabulary section of the Center Test started in 1997, and this was the year when the first students who studied English under the new Course of Study for six years from junior high school to senior high school took the test.

In the latest guideline, which went into effect in 2003 (in 2002 at elementary and junior high schools), “less strenuous education” was pursued further. The number of hours

of instruction was cut by about 10 % and the content of learning by 30 % (Ema, 2002). Students have less class time now and are not learning as much grammar as students did ten years ago.

Screened Textbooks

The Course of Study has a strong influence on education. The School Education Law states that schools should have curricula based on the guidelines provided by the Course of Study. Therefore, it sets the standard of education. It is written for teachers to read and follow. However, a lot of teachers focus more on textbooks, assuming that textbooks that have passed the government censorship will reflect the content of the Course of Study (Wada, 1997). Wada reports the results of a survey by *Kyokasho Toshō Kenkyū Senta* (Center for Research of Textbooks and Books) of 6900 teachers at elementary, junior and senior high schools about the Course of Study and textbooks. 28% of high school teachers answered that they were conscious about the Course of Study when they were teaching, but 70% said that they were not conscious about it because textbooks should reflect the Course of Study (Wada). This suggests that a lot of teachers rely on screened textbooks as the standard of education more than on the Course of Study.

There are two reasons why the government screens textbooks. First, it wants to have objectively made, fair textbooks. The second reason is that it wants to ensure that there are a range of creative textbooks from which schools can choose. By enforcing the censorship, the government can let a number of publishers in the private sector write and edit educational textbooks (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT]).

Most textbooks, except for about 10% of those for disabled students and of unpopular subjects such as fishery, go through this process of censorship, and it usually takes four years (MEXT). Publishers write textbooks according to the Course of Study, and submit them to the Education Ministry (MEXT). The Ministry sends them to the committee and it checks if textbooks follow the Course of Study, if they use appropriate materials, and if they have any mistakes or inaccurate parts (MEXT). The textbooks that have passed are sent to the Boards of Education of prefectures, cities and towns, where appropriate textbooks are chosen (MEXT). The list of textbooks is also printed. The one for high school for school year 2006, for example, was issued in April 21, 2005 by the Education Ministry, and had 34 textbooks for English I, 18 for Oral Communication I, 36 for English II, 6 for Oral Communication II, 25 for Reading, and 23 for Writing. There is no law about how high schools should choose textbooks, but the Boards of Education tend to choose them for public high schools (MEXT).

Questionnaire : Popular High School English Textbooks

I wondered what textbooks my students used at high school. Although textbooks are not accurate representation of what they learned, I thought they would indicate what education they received before entering university because a lot of high school teachers seem to be relying more on textbooks than on the Course of Study. I made a questionnaire to ask my students about it. The questionnaire was piloted with 25 students. A lot of them did not remember the names of the textbooks they used, so they wrote what sort of activities they did, such as listening and reading. In revising the questionnaire, I added a section where students checked the skills they practiced along with the names of the textbooks. Also, I decided to tell students the names of major textbooks to remind them of the titles. The completed questionnaire (Appendix A) was given in June 2005, to a total of 200 students at private universities in Kyoto.

The questionnaire consists of 13 questions. The first 4 questions are to gain background information about the students. The next 6 questions ask if they took any English classes and what they studied with what textbooks in each year of high school. The last three questions ask if they studied English at *juku* (cram schools).

The results (Appendix B) showed that students came from 37 different prefectures (two students went to high school abroad) with 64 % from Kinki regions and 58 % graduating from public high school (Tables B1 & B2). The skills they claimed they practiced for three years were reading (94%), writing (85%), grammar (74%), speaking (44 %), listening (34%) and others (3%) (Table B3). 196 students responded to question # 1, and the results show that they all followed the 1989 Course of Study in which all of the English courses were all elective, but all of them except two students in the third year answered that they studied English for three years (Table B4).

To my surprise, the students named more than 100 textbooks in total (See Appendix C for frequently mentioned textbooks). They include main textbooks, reference books, textbooks for self-study and textbooks exclusively made for entrance exams. Some students did not remember the exact names of the textbooks, but they wrote "the TOEFL book." Others mentioned the titles of movies such as *Titanic* and *Jurassic Park*. This implies that English education at high school is more varied now. The reason the number is quite large may be because 42% of the respondents went to private high schools where textbooks are chosen more freely as they are not strictly supervised by the Boards of Education.

Among those textbooks, the most popular ones were *Unicorn* (named 58 times), *Crown* (44 times) and *Milestone* (41 times). According to *Kyoto-fu Kyokasho Senta* (Textbook Center of Kyoto Prefecture), which is in charge of distributing screened textbooks to schools in the prefecture, *Unicorn*, *Crown* and *Powwow* were sent out most in 2001 and 2002 (personal communication by e-mail, September 9, 2005). Considering both the

results of the questionnaire and the official data, university teachers can expect a lot of their students to have used either *Unicorn* or *Crown* at high school.

Crown and Unicorn as Indicators of High School Education

The students who have become freshmen at university in April 2006 are those who have experienced high school education reflecting the newest Course of Study. Assuming the students have strictly followed this guideline, they have taken English I or Oral Communication I as a required course in their first year and continued studying English in elective courses (English II, Oral Communication II, English Reading and English Writing) in their second and third years. Considering the results of the survey, almost all the students probably have taken some of the electives in the second and third year and have studied English for three years.

A lot of these students, moreover, are expected to have used *Unicorn* and *Crown* series as their main textbooks. To find out the content of their learning, I examined these two textbooks for the English I course in comparison with the old version of *Unicorn* which I used when I was a student. I, as a learner, went over all the exercises in the three textbooks, carefully monitored what skills I was using to complete the tasks, and counted the number of times I used those skills. The following table shows the results :

Table 1: *Comparison of the number of exercises and activities*

| The number of | <i>Crown</i> (2006) | <i>Unicorn</i> (2006) | <i>Unicorn</i> (1986) |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Reading passages/exercises | 97 | 129 | 164 |
| Writing exercises/activities | 36 | 32 | 87 |
| Listening exercises/activities | 51 | 63 | 11 |
| Speaking exercises/activities | 31 | 38 | 0 |
| Vocabulary exercises | 52 | 63 | 40 |
| Grammar exercises | 27 | 43 | 76 |
| Pronunciation exercises | 19 | 18 | 52 |
| Translation (to English) exercises | 0 | 4 | 14 |
| Translation (to Japanese) exercises | 0 | 4 | 0 |

It is noticeable that the current textbooks have more listening and speaking exercises and activities. There are a lot of conversations, pair work activities, and class surveys. In contrast, the old textbook has more writing, grammar, pronunciation and translation exercises. This is clearly explained by the change in the Course of Study. The old *Unicorn* follows the guidelines of 1978 before the grammar-translation method was abandoned and

the communicative way of teaching was introduced.

It is interesting that the textbook from the 1980s has no speaking but a lot of pronunciation exercises. Each chapter of the old textbook uses a half page for pronunciation where individual sounds, liaison and word stress are dealt with. Also, there is a Sound Practice page every three chapters that has one or two listening quizzes as well as pronunciation quizzes and rhythm practice. In contrast, all aspects of pronunciation are practiced in four pronunciation practice pages in the new *Unicorn* and *Crown*.

There are more fill-in-the-blanks type exercises in the current textbooks. Students do not have to write whole sentences, whereas the old textbook requires students to do so, which is why the number of writing exercises is large in the old *Unicorn* and there are more vocabulary exercises in the new *Unicorn* and *Crown*. Almost all the sentences are started in these, and students just need to finish the rest or fill in a few blanks to finish. In many cases, even words that should be filled in to complete sentences are prepared in brackets in these textbooks.

The main difference in reading is seen in footnotes. New words with pronunciation appear in the bottom of each page in all of the three textbooks. Along with them, some phrases that are explained in Japanese and phrases that are with example sentences in English are also sometimes listed. In addition to these, the current textbooks have a few questions to help students understand the main points of the page or section of a reading passage. The new *Unicorn* has more questions than *Crown*, and they ask students about themselves. A lot of pages have a couple of sentences that show grammar points in boldface in these new textbooks, too.

As the following table shows, the length of a reading passage is shorter in the previous *Unicorn*. Instead, there are more chapters and extra passages in it. The number of words in the first and last chapters were counted, added, then divided by two to find out the rough, average length of each chapter. The estimated total number of words used in each textbook was calculated by multiplying the average length of a chapter by the number of

Table 2: Comparison of factors related to reading

| The number of | <i>Crown</i> (2006) | <i>Unicorn</i> (2006) | <i>Unicorn</i> (1986) |
|---|------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Pages (Pages for appendix) | 144(19) | 143(15) | 155(17) |
| Chapters | 8 | 10 | 14 |
| Extra reading passages | 2 | 1 | 3 |
| Words & idioms (Counted once) | 1594 | 1787 | 1849 |
| Words in the first chapter | 511 | 343 | 243 |
| Words in the last chapter | 760 | 664 | 414 |
| Words in all chapters (Estimated total) | 5084 | 5035 | 4599 |

chapters. The extra reading passages are not included in this calculation as they are different in quality from regular chapters. The old textbook has the least number of words in total (4599), but it uses more word variation than the other two (1849). This shows that the same words are not repeated in the old *Unicorn* as often as in the new *Unicorn* and *Crown*, which implies that the old textbook is a little more difficult to read than the new ones.

Passages are written in a way that students will feel connected to topics in the new *Unicorn* and *Crown*. In other words, they are more appealing and make students feel that topics are related to issues in society and the world around them. All of the three textbooks have a couple of chapters about a person. However, they tell a story about the person in a different way. The new textbooks, for example, have the person himself talking to students to send an important message and two people talking about what they can learn from that person. On the other hand, the old textbook uses the narrative style only. The current textbooks talk more about what is behind the facts about a person, while the old one only talks about facts. This naturally leads to the last section of each chapter in the new textbooks where students have to answer some questions about what they think about the topic using their own information. More real-to-life functional language, such as describing a person or room and giving directions, is taught in the current textbooks, too.

The latest textbooks and old one are quite different overall. The new ones are more colorful with beautiful photos and illustrations and have a variety of exercises, while the old one is black-and-white and follows the same pattern in every chapter. For instance, in the first section of each chapter, the *Unicorn* from 1986 always has a one-page long dialog, whereas the new *Unicorn* has several different types of introductory exercises, such as listening to choose the appropriate pictures or words and conversation with a list of words for substitution. Another example is seen in the comprehension section after reading. There are some questions to check understanding and a summarizing passage with some blanks to be filled in in the old textbook. The current ones have similar exercises, but they are more attractive. There are a variety of listening exercises, and a plain summary completion exercise is replaced by a torn memo which students have to restore by filling in missing parts, for instance. *Crown* sometimes uses charts as graphic organizers for better understanding of reading passages. All told, there are only six different kinds of exercises in the old *Unicorn*. Two of them appear in almost all the chapters: "Change the following Japanese sentences into English." and "Point out sentence patterns of the following sentences." Moreover, the number of exercises is much larger in the latest textbooks, while there are always only four or five in the old textbook.

On a different note, I noticed that the directions for all the exercises and activities in the three textbooks are written in Japanese. This is different from a lot of textbooks used in university English classes.

Conclusion

This report suggests some points that lecturers at universities should be aware of. First, we should know that high school English education has been changing due to the shift in the government's educational policy, and not all students receive similar education compared to the past. We should expect differences in students' English abilities. Also, we should not assume that Japanese students are good at grammar. The time of the grammar-translation method is gone in theory, so fewer teachers are focusing on grammar than in the past. In addition to that, the fact that the total amount of class time has been reduced due to *yutori* education may have prevented a number of students from having enough time to practice grammar points thoroughly. We probably want to make sure that all the students understand grammar items we deal with in class to help them improve their communication skills. It would be better not to skip explanations and to give students enough practice time so that they can internalize grammar. Furthermore, there might be students who are not used to writing whole sentences, let alone paragraphs. Simple mechanics may need to be ensured with some students. Finally, we should not believe all or any communicative activities attract our students. Instead of studying grammar and translating Japanese into English and vice versa, some students may have experienced various activities in high school. We should judge correctly what exercises and activities are meaningful for our students to improve their English by understanding each student's strengths and weaknesses. It is hoped that this paper has advanced the readers' knowledge of high school education through a review of popular high school English textbooks.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

(Translated from Japanese)

This questionnaire is to investigate how much English you studied at high school. Your cooperation will be appreciated. (The results will be used for research purpose only.)

- 1) When did you graduate from high school? March, _____
(year)
- 2) In which prefecture is your high school located? _____
- 3) Is your high school national, prefectural, municipal or private?
 - 1 national
 - 2 prefectural
 - 3 municipal
 - 4 private
 - 5 others ()
- 4) What course were you in when you were at high school?
 - 1 I was in the course focusing on English/international issues.
 - 2 I was in the course focusing on Japanese.
 - 3 I was in the course focusing on math/science.
 - 4 I was in the other course than the above. ()
 - 5 There were not any courses at my high school.
- 5) Were you taking English classes when you were a first-year student at high school?
 - 1 Yes. → Go to question #6.
 - 2 No. → Go to question #7.

- 6) How often did you study English per week? What kinds of skills did you learn with what textbooks?

_____ times a week

Names of textbooks: _____

(Choose all that apply.)

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|---------------------|
| 1 speaking | 2 listening | 3 reading |
| 4 writing | 5 grammar | 6 others () |

- 7) Were you taking English classes when you were a second-year student at high school?

- 1 Yes. → Go to question #8.
- 2 No. → Go to question #9.

- 8) How often did you study English per week? What kinds of skills did you learn with what textbooks?

_____ times a week

Names of textbooks: _____

(Choose all that apply.)

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|---------------------|
| 1 speaking | 2 listening | 3 reading |
| 4 writing | 5 grammar | 6 others () |

- 9) Were you taking English classes when you were a third-year student at high school?

- 1 Yes. → Go to question #10.
- 2 No. → Go to question #11.

- 10) How often did you study English per week? What kinds of skills did you learn with what textbooks?

_____ times a week

Names of textbooks: _____

(Choose all that apply.)

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|---------------------|
| 1 speaking | 2 listening | 3 reading |
| 4 writing | 5 grammar | 6 others () |

- 11) Were you attending *juke* and studying English there when you were a first-year student at high school?

- 1 Yes.
- 2 No.

- 12) Were you attending *juke* and studying English there when you were a second-year student at high school?

- 1 Yes.
- 2 No.

- 13) Were you attending *juke* and studying English there when you were a third-year student at high school?

- 1 Yes.
- 2 No.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Appendix B

Results of the Questionnaire

Table B1: The result of question #2

| Area | Prefecture | # | Total | % | Area | Prefecture | # | Total | % | Area | Prefecture | # | Total | % | |
|--------|------------|----|-------|------|---------|------------|---|-------|------|----------|------------|---|-------|-----|---|
| Kansai | Kyoto | 58 | 127 | 63.8 | Chubu | Nagano | 1 | 20 | 10.1 | Chugoku | Yamaguchi | 1 | 13 | 6.5 | |
| | Osaka | 31 | | | | Yamanashi | 1 | | | | Hiroshima | 6 | | | |
| | Shiga | 8 | | | | Fukui | 2 | | | | Okayama | 4 | | | |
| | Nara | 6 | | | | Ishikawa | 1 | | | | Tottori | 1 | | | |
| | Hyogo | 12 | | | | Gifu | 4 | | | | Shimane | 1 | | | |
| Kanto | Mie | 7 | 11 | 5.5 | Shikoku | Toyama | 1 | 10 | 5 | Tohoku | Fukuoka | 3 | 5 | 2.5 | |
| | Wakayama | 5 | | | | Aichi | 6 | | | | Oita | 1 | | | |
| | Tokyo | 1 | | | | Shizuoka | 2 | | | | Kumamoto | 1 | | | |
| | Chiba | 2 | | | | Niigata | 2 | | | | Fukushima | 1 | | | |
| | Kanagawa | 2 | | | | Kagawa | 5 | | | | Iwate | 1 | | | |
| Kanto | Saitama | 3 | 2 | 1 | Abroad | Kochi | 1 | 2 | 1 | Hokkaido | | 9 | 4.5 | | |
| | Ibaragi | 2 | | | | Tokushima | 0 | | | | | | | 2 | 1 |
| | Gunma | 1 | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

Table B2: The result of question #3

| | national | public | | private | others |
|-------|----------|-------------|-----------|---------|--------|
| | | prefectural | municipal | | |
| # | 2 | 97 | 16 | 83 | 0 |
| Total | | 115 | | | |
| % | | 58.1 | | 41.9 | 0 |

Table B3: The results of questions #6, #8 & #10

| | | speaking | listening | reading | writing | grammar | others |
|---------------------|----------|----------|-----------|---------|---------|---------|--------|
| | | # | | | | | |
| Studied English | 1st year | # | 84 | 177 | 141 | 151 | 2 |
| | | % | 39.6 | 91.7 | 73.1 | 78.2 | 1.0 |
| | 2nd year | # | 78 | 177 | 164 | 135 | 8 |
| | | % | 41.7 | 94.7 | 87.7 | 72.2 | 4.3 |
| | 3rd year | # | 85 | 175 | 172 | 134 | 9 |
| | | % | 30.1 | 95.1 | 93.5 | 72.8 | 4.9 |
| Average for 3 years | % | 34 | 44 | 94 | 85 | 74 | 3 |

Table B4: The result of questions #1, #5, #7 & #9

| | Year graduated | 1994~ | 2000 | 2001 | 2002 | 2003 | 2004 | 2005 |
|-----------------|-----------------|-------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
| | Course of Study | 1989 | | | | | | |
| Studied English | #*1 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 31 | 155 |
| | 1st year # | 196 | | | | | | |
| | 2nd year # | 195*2 | | | | | | |
| | 3rd year # | 192*3 | | | | | | |

* 1 Four students did not answer question #1 (when they graduated from high school), therefore, the total number in this analysis is 196.

* 2 One student did not answer question #7 (if they studied English when they were second-year students).

* 3 Two students did not answer question #9 (if they studied English when they were third-year students).

Appendix C

The List of Textbooks Mentioned Frequently

| Name of Textbook | Number of Times Mentioned |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Unicorn | 58 |
| Forest | 46 |
| Crown | 44 |
| Milestone | 42 |
| Next Stage | 41 |
| <i>Sokusen Zemi</i> | 25 |
| Select Reading | 22 |
| Target | 21 |
| Dual Scope | 17 |
| Chart | 17 |
| Northstar | 17 |
| At will | 16 |
| Est | 15 |
| Evergreen | 11 |
| Creative | 10 |
| Genius | 9 |
| New Cosmos | 9 |
| Paulstar | 8 |
| Database | 7 |
| Grammar in Use | 7 |
| New Crown | 7 |
| Lifeline | 6 |
| <i>Sokudoku Eitango</i> | 5 |
| Powwow | 5 |
| <i>Eigo no Koubun 150</i> | 5 |
| Oral Communication A | *59 |

* All the textbooks for the Oral Communication A course have "Oral Communication A" on the cover as a part of names. Students did not remember by which publisher it was written. Therefore, this was excluded from the analysis.

高校英語教育の変遷：英語教科書の比較

桜 井 延 子

要 約

本稿では、文部科学省により作成される学習指導要領の変遷がたどられ、高等学校での英語教育の方針が文法中心からどのように変化してきたかについて述べられている。法律により施行されている学習指導要領は、教育に大きな影響を与えており、教科書は学習指導要領に基づいて作成、検閲されて、教育基準を提示している。そこで、200名の大学一回生にアンケートを実施、『ユニコーン』・『クラウン』がよく使用されている高校英語教科書であるという結果に基づき、新しい学習指導要領の内容を反映したこの二冊の教科書と以前の『ユニコーン』を比較することで、大学生が入学前にどのような英語教育を受けてきたかについての情報を提供している。

キーワード：英語教育，高校，学習指導要領，教科書，変化