

## Examining EFL Textbooks in Asia

by Najma Janjua (Kagawa Prefectural University of Health Sciences, Japan)

### This article in a nutshell

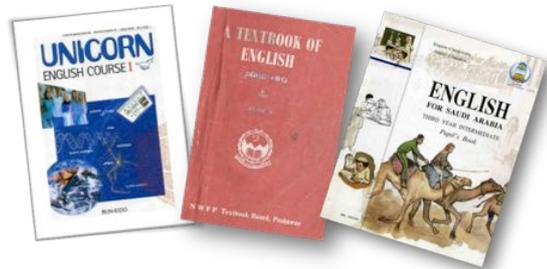
In a nutshell, this article discusses the rationale for examining textbooks used in Asia for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL), describes a study in which Japanese high school English teachers examined EFL textbooks from Japan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Janjua, 2007) and offers suggestions for critical evaluation and improvement of Japanese EFL education.

### Why examine Asian EFL textbooks?

Textbooks are invaluable tools for language teaching and learning. They introduce new language, present content and guide the learners (Freeman, 2006). Textbooks especially play a critical role at the level when learners begin to study the target language and in the immediately following years. Although recently, there has been a worldwide trend to introduce English into the elementary school curriculum, in most non-native Asian countries, including Japan, EFL instruction in the public school system still begins largely at the secondary school level. Thus, high school EFL textbooks in these countries can be expected to play a crucial role in helping learners acquire the fundamental principles of the language which form the basis of learning in later stages. Examining high school EFL textbooks in Asia, therefore, can lead to important insights into understanding the processes of English teaching and learning in the region.

Examining Asian EFL textbooks is of particular relevance in the Japanese context. It is a well-known fact that on standard tests of English proficiency, Japanese rank the lowest or at the bottom among Asian countries (Noriguchi, 2007). It is also generally known that people from many non-native English countries in Asia are better speakers of English as compared to the Japanese. In an Asahi Shimbun article, Mineo Nakajima, president of Akita International University, refers to his experiences of attending international conferences, saying that at such gatherings, the inability of Japanese participants to speak English prevents them from getting their message out. "While I see people from other Asian nations chattering away in English," he writes, "the Japanese in attendance always sit around in silence. This is not the way it should be" (Nakajima, 2004).

Why should there be such marked differences in English abilities between the Japanese and their



Asian counterparts? What could EFL education systems in other Asian countries have that is different from the Japanese system?

In a comparative study of English education in Japan and Pakistan, significant differences were found in the way the language is taught in the two countries (Janjua, 2000). Results of the study suggested that differences in the English teaching methods used may underlie apparent differences in the communicative abilities of people from the two countries. Thus, comparing how English is taught in Japan and other Asian countries, and the tools used in the process, can help answer the above questions and identify factors that may contribute to the poorer English abilities of the Japanese. With high school EFL textbooks being an integral part of EFL education, these indispensable teaching tools offer themselves as ideal candidates to examine when comparing EFL education between different Asian countries.

However, while a number of investigations have been carried out to evaluate Japanese high school EFL textbooks (for a review, see: Kobayakawa, 2011), the only study, to my knowledge, that has compared EFL textbooks from Japan with those from other countries is one that I reported five years ago. The study, described briefly below, looked at high school EFL texts from Japan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia through the eyes of Japanese high school teachers and provided convincing evidence for a need to examine EFL textbooks across Asia, especially for the sake of improving EFL education in Japan.

### Teachers Examining Asian Textbooks

In my study (Janjua, 2007), 96 Japanese junior and senior high school teachers were shown sample lessons and exercises from high school EFL textbooks used in Japan, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. The details for these (titles, grade levels, pages) are shown in the table on the next page. Four sample

pages from each country's text were used. The first two pages in each case contained the main lesson comprising the text and exercises while the latter two pages included only exercises. All textbooks used were approved by the ministry or board of education of the respective country.

The teachers were asked to examine the sample pages and then to indicate in writing their preferred choice among the textbooks from the three countries. The specific question that teachers in the study were asked was: *As junior/senior high school teachers, which country's textbooks would you prefer to teach?* The teachers examined the textbooks and wrote their responses during a lecture and workshop session that was part of a high school teacher training seminar administered by a local Japanese prefectural government.

#### High School EFL Textbooks Used (Janjua, 2007)

Country	Textbook	Grade	Pages
 Japan	<i>Unicorn English Course 1</i>	Senior High 1	102, 103 114, 115
 Pakistan	<i>A Textbook of English Book Two</i>	Senior High 1	10, 11 38, 39
 Saudi Arabia	<i>English for Saudi Arabia ThirdYear Intermediate</i>	Junior High 3	54, 55 62, 63

The table below shows the Japanese teachers' preferences as indicated by their responses. Of the 97 teachers who examined the three textbooks, 69 (71%) gave a clear answer to the question. Of these 69 clear responders, only 5 teachers (7%) picked the Japanese textbook. The remaining 64 (93%) all clearly chose either the Pakistani or Saudi Arabian textbook as their preferred choice.

#### Japanese Teachers' Preferences (Janjua, 2007)

Preference	Responses	% of Total
Japan	5	7 %
Pakistan or Saudi Arabia	64	93 %
TOTAL	69	100 %

#### Rationalizing the results

An obvious question that these results raise is: Why would such an overwhelming majority of Japanese high school teachers show a preference to use foreign textbooks over those from their own

country? The results clearly point to dissatisfaction by the teachers with Japanese high school EFL textbooks. The findings may also reflect increased awareness among Japanese teachers of the importance of English in the present day world.

#### Comments by Teachers

In the study, Japanese teachers were not asked to give specific reasons for their preferences. However, in written observations, more than 85% echoed the following 5 typical statements:

- *The mother tongue is used only in the Japanese textbook.*
- *The textbooks from Pakistan and Saudi Arabia are written all in English.*
- *Only the Japanese textbook has instructions in the native language.*
- *Only the Japanese textbook has questions in Japanese.*
- *The Japanese textbook has many Japanese explanations (but) other texts use only English.*

These comments suggest that the presence or absence of the mother tongue in the textbooks is likely to have been a contributing factor in teachers' preferences for the Pakistani and Saudi texts over the Japanese textbook.

#### Global English and EFL in Japan

English is now considered a window to the world. It is the most commonly studied foreign language globally, the dominant language in the field of science, and dominates a wide range of daily life areas such as advertising, travel, business, telecommunications, news media and computer technology (Montgomery, 2004). In some European countries, up to 80% of the population can now speak English (Graddol, 2004). Despite this international backdrop, however, the English communication abilities of the Japanese remain poor (Janjua, 2005; Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004).

In the past two decades, the Japanese Ministry of Education has taken a number of measures to improve English language education at the junior and senior high school levels. These have included introduction of the *Japan Exchange and Teaching Program* (JET), study abroad programs for Japanese high school English teachers and revised guidelines for the course of study at primary and secondary schools (Samimy and Kobayashi, 2004). In spite of all these efforts, however, ministry reforms have not been effective (Stewart, 2009).

#### Learning from Asian Neighbors

There is thus a clear and urgent need to look deeper into the system of EFL education in Japan,

especially at secondary level when the language is introduced and acquired over a period of 6 years. It is critical to identify the fundamental problems and deficiencies in the system, and to take appropriate measures to deal with them. To aid in this process and to understand why Japanese lag behind Asia and the rest of the world in their English abilities, it is logical, rational and worthwhile to examine how EFL teaching and learning are practiced beyond Japan's borders and especially by its Asian neighbors (Janjua, 2009).

A lot can be learned from looking at the systems of EFL education in other Asian countries where, like Japan, English is taught as a foreign language but where, unlike Japan, even high school graduates can communicate in English with a fair degree of fluency (Janjua, 2005).

The study described here suggests there may be serious deficiencies in EFL textbooks in Japan as judged by the observation that only 5 out of 69 Japanese teachers chose the Japanese text over the foreign texts. It may be tempting to ask if at least some of the differences in the English ability of high school graduates from Japan and other Asian countries could be related to differences found in EFL texts in these countries. Textbooks may not tell it all, but being the core component of the EFL education system, they have the potential to tell a lot about differences in EFL pedagogy and English learning outcomes in Asian countries.

**Recapitulating and looking ahead**

Examining high school EFL textbooks from non-native English-speaking countries in Asia has the advantage not only of helping us to understand EFL pedagogy in the region but also to elucidate deficiencies in the Japanese EFL education system. Through such comparisons, the Japanese system can be critically examined, revised and improved to bring it in line with other Asian countries. The rationale for examining EFL texts in Asia and the study described here warrant a critical look at Japanese high school EFL textbooks. Future studies should focus on identifying specific factors and textbook features

that possibly contributed to Japanese high school teachers' rejection of EFL texts from their own country as seen in my study.

**References**

Freeman, D. (2006) Course books as tools for activity in language classrooms. *The Language Teacher*, 30(7): 5-9.

Graddol, D. (2004) *The future of language*. Science, 303: 1329-1331.

Janjua, N. (2000): Looking at English education in non-native English speaking countries: Japan vs. Pakistan. *The English Teachers' Magazine*, 48(14):92-93

Janjua, N. (2005) Why can't Japanese speak English? *Bulletin of Higher Education*, Okayama University, 1: 67-72

Janjua, N. (2007) Comparing high school English texts from non-native English countries. *Bulletin of Higher Education*, Okayama University, 3: 87-91

Janjua, N. (2009) Look overseas to address Japan's lag in English ability. *Japan Times Online* <[www.japantimes.co.jp/text/fl20090331hn.html](http://www.japantimes.co.jp/text/fl20090331hn.html)>

Kobayakawa, M. (2011) Analyzing writing tasks in Japanese high school English textbooks. *JALT Journal*, 33(1): 27-48

Montgomery, S. (2004) Of towers, walls and fields. *Science*, 303: 1333-1335

Nakajima, M. (2004) Globally speaking, Japan needs English for tots. *The Asahi Shimbun*, 15 November. <[www.asahi.com/english/opinion/TKY200411150089.html](http://www.asahi.com/english/opinion/TKY200411150089.html)>

Noriguchi, S. (2007) Japan needs to improve English education system. *China Daily*, 30 March. <[www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2007-03/30/content\\_839890.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2007-03/30/content_839890.htm)>

Samimy, K.K. and Kobayashi, C. (2004) Toward the development of intercultural communicative competence: Theoretical and pedagogical implications for Japanese English teachers. *JALT Journal*, 26(2): 245-261

Stewart, T. (2009): Will the new English curriculum for 2013 work? *The Language Teacher*, 33(11).

**Najma Janjua**  
 Kagawa Prefectural University of Health Sciences,  
 Japan <[janjua@chs.pref.kagawa.jp](mailto:janjua@chs.pref.kagawa.jp)>

<p><b>Green Teacher</b>          &lt; <a href="http://www.greenteacher.com">www.greenteacher.com</a> &gt;</p>  <p><i>Green Teacher</i> offers exciting ideas, activities and resources to help you promote environmental awareness at your school. Check out their website and magazine!</p>	<p><b>United Nations Works</b>          &lt; <a href="http://www.un.org/works/">www.un.org/works/</a> &gt;</p>  <p><i>UN Works</i> is a great global ed site for teaching about human rights, peace, poverty and AIDS. Check out their <i>What's Going On?</i> global issue video series!</p>	<p><b>Teachers Against Prejudice</b>  <a href="http://www.teachersagainstprejudice.org">www.teachersagainstprejudice.org</a></p>  <p><i>Teachers Against Prejudice</i> is dedicated to fighting prejudice, hate and intolerance through education. Check out their list of recommended films and books!</p>
---	--	--