"Conversation" Instruction: Do we know what we're doing?

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Conventional wisdom has long had it that Japanese receive a great deal of instruction in English grammar, reading, and writing, but that conventional curricula lack instruction in listening or speaking skills. To remedy this deficiency, a major industry in English instruction has been developed in Japan. This English industry includes the development of "English Conversation Schools" whose business it is to provide opportunities for Japanese students to learn how to speak English. In addition, most colleges also provide instruction, usually by native-speaking teachers in "conversation." An enormous publishing support industry has also sprung up to provide the materials that the teachers of this subject need.

Regardless of whether Japanese junior and senior high school students really do get a good grounding in reading and writing skills, the prevalence of English conversation classes taught by native speakers suggests that student weakness in speaking skills is getting educators' attention. How did this emphasis on the teaching of English conversation change and what do the materials provided for its instructors tell us about the nature of the instruction?

In the 1960's the audio-lingual approach was the favored method for teaching oral language skills. This method involved the use of substitution drills and pattern-practice training in the use of grammatical forms. It was believed that the students, through repetition of the various forms, would come to habitualize their use of them. The target language could be acquired through repetition.

Typically the teacher would give a sample sentence which

the students would repeat. For example, if the lesson called for the study of the present continuous tense, the teacher would recite, "I am going to the station." The students would repeat, "I am going to the station." The teacher would change the phrase slightly, "He is going to the station." The students would parrot this sentence, "He is going to the station." Having established the pattern, the teacher would then only provide cue words which the students would use in their repetition of the basic form. A lesson would proceed as follows:

Teacher: I am going to the station.
Students: I am going to the station.
Teacher: He is going to the station.
Students: He is going to the station.
Teacher: She
Students: She is going to the station.
Teacher: We
Students: We are going to the station.
Teacher: The library.
Students: We are going to the library.

The weakness of this type of approach is obvious. In addition to "going to the station or the library" students would also likely be going crazy with boredom. The lack of connection to the real world of language use made it difficult for students to make the transition from the rigidity of the classroom to the fluidity of language as it is used in the outside world. Students would repeat the forms without actually acquiring them. Moreover, the teacher-centered nature of the instruction did not allow students freedom to learn according to their own learning styles. Teachers were also bored.

Out of this frustration with the tediousness of the audio-lingual method grew the functional or communicative approach–the approach that is most common today in "English conversation" instruction.

The communicative approach stresses the use of the language in "real situations." It strives to make use of the

language in functional terms rather than in out-of-context repetition drilling. It attempts to provide a simulation of the real world in the classroom. Since students might need to be able to use English to order food in a restaurant, for example, a lesson on how to order food would be provided. Students would be asked to simulate the restaurant environment and role play the phrases and expressions that they would really need. The teacher's role is reduced from being the center of the classroom to that of providing the proper environment that students could use to learn at their own speed and in their own ways. The teacher's role, in other words, changes from being that of an "instructor" at the center of the educational process to that of a "facilitator" for the central learning activity of the learners themselves.

A typical lesson would begin with the teacher supplying a role model of what the students would be expected to do on their own. The textbook usually presents all the phrases and expressions that are needed. A tape is often provided to model the conversation that the students will "role play."

The tape may be played once or twice while the students listen. The teacher may ask questions about the material presented in the tape, drawing on the students own experiences in ordering food in restaurants, for example. Next the students might read through the conversation in pairs to familiarize themselves with the expressions and vocabulary necessary to role play.

Finally, the students might be provided with simulated menus and would be asked to act out the conversation and actually pretend to order food in a restaurant.

Out of this sort of general lesson: ordering in restaurants, introducing yourself, buying something in a store, using public transportation and so on, has evolved English for Special Purposes (ESP). ESP is an area of functional language instruction that teaches English for use in a very narrow area of expertise.

If the students are training to become computer programmers, for instance, they would be instructed in all the expressions

and phrases that they might need to use in that special area of language use. Similarly air traffic controllers who clearly need to know English would be taught only the language they would need to do their jobs well. How to order food in restaurants or other general-purpose areas of instruction would not be a part of these ESP lessons. While there may be some students who need only the special English required to function in some specific capacity, most people need a broader range of language skills. A problem, typical to most college-age English students in Japan, is that many students have no clear goals for their study of English. Because the very nature of the communicative approach takes its definition from the learning style and purpose of the learner and not the teacher, this lack of focus in the learners' minds has resulted in what I will show to be considerable confusion in the development of English materials and a debilitating tendency in the classroom.

The development of materials for use in the English language classroom has reflected the move from the audio-lingual method to the communicative approach. Available on the market today are text books that still have a large audio-lingual component in their presentation and others which are dominantly communicative. Which textbook a teacher might choose depends on that teacher's teaching style and his/her assessment of what will suit the students best.

In Japan, the communicative type of textbook has gained a certain ascendancy as many teachers continue to believe that Japanese students in particular have already had enough instruction in rigid, grammar-based exercises and need an opportunity for oral practice instead. The problem, as defined earlier, is that materials development for the communicative approach should take into consideration the learning strategies of the students. The audio-lingual approach was a "top-down" formulation - the teacher and the method designers knew what was best for the students who were relegated to a behavioral modification role in learning the language. Learning a foreign tongue was not

supposed to be easy, and not as much attention was paid to making the class "fun." The communicative approach, on the other hand, holds out the promise that language learning is not only fun, but actually easy. In the introductions of many of the textbooks reviewed for this article, emphasis is placed on how the materials selected for the textbook will hold the students' interest and provide "Fun topics and activities."[1] The authors of another textbook state, "It is not suitable for anyone who believes that learning involves suffering."[2]

This is not to say that learning a foreign tongue cannot be fun some of the time, but clearly there is an element of work, if not suffering, involved. One cannot pick up a foreign language by sleeping with a tape on or by spending hours of inactivity in the presence of native speakers. Language transfer does not ordinarily take place by osmosis.

The purpose of this article is to explore the ways in which materials support the methodology which, in turn, focuses on a learner-centered activity base. The fact that many of the learners are, for the most part, lacking in goals and an ability to self-direct their learning process has caused confusion in the development of textbooks.

Let's begin with the underlying issues associated with textbook development and explore how textbook authors evaluate the presentation of their materials to address those issues.

One of the most obvious of jumping-off points in textbook development is the level of the students for whom the materials are to be directed. In the creation of reading materials, for example, some sort of level-evaluation is made possible by extensive grading experience for use in native-language schools. Although the English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners have different requirements than the native-speaking learner, one can assume that a level of reading vocabulary and content that fits, say a native-speaking fifth grader, would be "easier" than that suitable for a college graduate. The ESL/EFL learner might have a college level

reading ability in his/her native language, but making the transition to the same level in the target language (English) might require passage through a less complex stage of easier reading. In other words, the level of language competence required to read the previous sentence with its relatively difficult vocabulary and structure is "higher" than that required to read and understand, "Bobby hit the ball."

In reading skill development, in addition to the acquisition of vocabulary and the skills of reading from contextual clues, a certain understanding of basic grammar and syntax is essential. These skills also can be graded by level.

In listening comprehension too, level assignment or grading is possible to some extent. An ability to have "the ear" for simple phrases - slowly and clearly enunciated - is quite different from that required to comprehend complicated utterances said quickly with reduced speech in a heavy regional accent.

For oral skills, we can assume that there must be some sort of levels in acquisition, but defining them remains problematical. The foreign mathematician who has no problem giving a presentation in her/his area of expertise might be stymied by the language required to order a large pizza with everything except anchovies on it.

In the use of one's own native language, conversational expertise is conditioned by the topic, conversation partner or partners, and the environment where the conversation is taking place. A casual conversation, one-to-one, about a favorite sport would require little effort, while making a statement in front of a hundred people on a subject one was only slightly familiar with would cause nervousness and might involve stammering, restatement and other degradations of fluency. Some conversations are simple enough to be carried on while concentrating on something else such as a TV program, while other dialogues require one's complete attention.

Similarly, levels of conversational expertise or competence pertain even more dramatically to the use of a foreign language.

If the variation in fluency in one's native language could be said to vary between 100% of capability for a very familiar topic in a comfortable environment and, say, 80% fluency when one is under some sort of pressure due to lack of knowledge of the subject or because of the social setting, the variation in foreign language competence must swing even more dramatically. While one may converse freely in a foreign language about one topic, one might equally be completely at a loss when the subject changes. Lack of vocabulary, lack of grammatical skills, uncertainty about the social register, or all of these together might cause one to plummet from near-native fluency to babbling incoherence. We can say that level of competence varies according to a variety of factors.

For the writers of "conversation" text books then, the problem is not only one of defining "level" but also of deciding what kinds of conversations are suitable for the audience to learn. In addition, the writer must allow for enough practice exercises so that the learner has adequate opportunity to internalize the material, to acquire the forms being taught.

If one of the purposes of the communicative approach is to provide relevant, content-oriented materials based typically on the students' own "interests and needs"[3], then it could be said that the age-old phrase book is the ultimate in learner-driven materials. The learner need only look up the phrase that is necessary at the moment. Want to order that large pizza? The language learner only needs to look up how to say, "I'd like a large pizza with everything except anchovies, please." The other phrases for finding out where the toilet is or how to get from point A to point B can be saved for when the need arises. The problem with phrase books is that in lacking an organized approach to how the materials can best be learned, they make it difficult if not impossible to "learn" or acquire the language items presented in them. A tourist can use the language with the phrase book in hand, but if the book is lost or if the book is lacking some phrase, the language user is stuck, having no

acquired language to fall back upon. Acquisition would depend on how often one ordered that pizza, in other words, repetition.

This same problem, as I will show in this paper, has also become prevalent in popular ESL/EFL materials which are in wide use in Japan today.

How can textbooks be evaluated? For the purposes of this study, I have undertook to evaluate textbooks in three ways. First a comparison of the levels the textbook writers claim to address. Second on the basis of internal consistency as to what grammatical forms are introduced and when, and third on the basis of what functions are introduced and when. I have also conducted some preliminary investigation about the amount of practice afforded various communicative points and grammar skills.

The level of the textbook as described by the author or by the publisher in promotional materials is the first avenue of approach for the ESL/EFL instructor. Teachers decide to order materials based on whether or not they are likely to fit the level of the class being taught. While placement testing is a prerequisite to study in most intensive English programs in the US and UK, it is not generally a part of class assignment at the university level in Japan. University instructors, therefore, must target their materials at the "center" of what they perceive as the class level, a perception based largely on experience. The university "English conversation" teacher who has not misjudged what textbook to use with the class at some point in his/her career probably does not exist. Again, the problem is not only lack of proper placement procedures but also the lack of clear standards for level definition among textbook authors.

I reviewed 18 textbooks (see appendix) produced by various publishers all of which were described as being for students in the "beginning" to "intermediate" levels. Careful investigation reveals, however, that the terms used to describe levels are selected without any real reference to standards. A textbook described as being for low beginners or beginners such

as *Express English: Beginnings* by Ferreira, published by Newbury does not begin with how to write the English alphabet, for example, or start with sounding out words phonically. It presumes an ability to read and write English at a fairly sophisticated level. Another textbook, *Access to English: Starting Out* by Coles and Lord, part of a series published by Oxford, states on the back cover, "STARTING OUT is the first book of ACCESS TO ENGLISH, a four-part course...which takes students with no previous knowledge of English up to a good intermediate level."[4] Lesson 1 of this, the first book in the series, however, begins with the heading, "The Library in Middleford," and continues with a practice in questions about the map. Someone with "no previous knowledge of English," an immigrant, say, from the hill country of Laos, might find this textbook somewhat daunting to say the least.

Clearly the idea of level when not grounded in any well established set of standards takes on certain characteristics more typical of a mirage. This lack of standards in levels is one that plagues professional evaluation of many aspects of the ESL/EFL profession and one which should be addressed in its own right.

In the development of communicative textbooks, most writers realize that the phrase book style of materials cannot apply to the needs of the classroom learner, and so consequently many still retain some sense that a grammatical approach to learning to speak English is important. Almost every textbook reviewed in this study included as a part of its lesson plans descriptions of the grammatical points covered. Many included separate grammatical explanations as a part of the lessons themselves. And most made recourse to audio-lingual-type exercises that centered on a grammatical point.

Despite this implied position that a grammar orientation is important, the internal consistency of most of the textbooks reviewed left a great deal to be desired. If the textbook author plans to introduce the present perfect tense in lesson 6, for example, what is the learner and the instructor to conclude

when it is used willy-nilly in lessons 1 through 5? Does this mean that the author is not really introducing it in lesson 6? Does the author expect a "beginning student" to have a working knowledge of the present perfect before opening the book?

One textbook presented a list of what was expected in the way of preliminary grammatical knowledge. In this book, the second in a series, the authors provide the information so that students who did not previously use the first book in the series will have some idea of what was covered there. The second book is described as being for intermediate students. The first in the series is for beginners. The list of beginners "assumed knowledge of the language" consists of eighteen items which are shown verbatim below.

"1. Present/Past of be
2. *There is/are/was/were*
3. Imperatives
4. Simple present
5. Present Progressive (*be* + *-ing*)
6. Simple Past - regular/irregular
7. Past Progressive
8. Future with *going to*
9. Present Perfect — regular/irregular + *just/already/ for/since/yet*.
10. Auxiliary modals: can/could
11. Question words: *Who?/Where?/What?/Whose?/Why?/When?/How?*
12. Personal Pronouns: *I/me/my/mine/etc*.
13. Possessive *'s/s'*
14. Adjectives - comparative/superlative - regular/irregular
15. Adverbs of manner: *quickly/well*, etc. Adverbs of frequency: *often/sometimes/never*, etc.
16. Prepositions of place/time/movement
17. Mass and Unit: *a/some/any/much/many/a lot of/a few/ a little/not enough/one/ones/all/both/neither/none*
18. The time/day/dates/seasons/numbers/points of time"[5]

Since, for instance, even relatively advanced Japanese speakers of English often still have trouble with numbers, the meaning behind "assumed knowledge" is opaque. Does this mean that "beginning" students have acquired these forms or that they merely have been exposed to them. Despite the statement that the content of the list is "assumed knowledge of the language," if it were literally true, intermediate students, never mind advanced learners, would have little more to do than learn the passive voice.

To evaluate more clearly what grammar points are covered in a given textbook and in what lessons they appear, I used an evaluation form which appears below [fig. 1].

fig. 1

TEXTBOOK ________________ AUTHOR ________________

PUB./DATE/ed ________________

LEV: LB B FB/HB LI I HI L A HA

GRAMMAR: lesson described as having grammar focus / first a ppearance in text

☐ detailed grammatical explanation or contrast of forms

Verb Use (active)

present tense *BE* ________/________☐

past tense *BE* ________/________☐

present tense ________/________☐

past tense: *reg.* ________/________☐

irreg. ________/________☐

present continuous ________/________☐

past continuous ________/________☐

fut. continuous ________/________☐

fut. tense *BE GOING TO* ________/________☐

fut. tense *WILL* ________/________☐

present perfect ________/________☐

past perfect ________/________☐

present perf. continuous ________/________☐

IF clauses ________/________☐

imperative ________/________☐

<u>Verb</u> <u>Use</u> <u>(passive)</u>

present ________/________☐

past ________/________☐

pres. perf. ________/________☐

pres. continuous ________/________☐

past continuous ________/________☐

<u>Modals</u>

would ________/________☐

have to ________/________☐

can ________/________☐

could ________/________☐

might ________/________☐

should ________/________☐

must ________/________☐

may ________/________☐

<u>Other</u>

comparative ________/________☐

superlative ________/________☐

adverbs of frequency ________/________☐

multi-word verbs ________/________☐

expletive *there* ________/________☐

expletive *it* ________/________☐

Y/N question ________/________☐

Info question ________/________☐

tag questions ________/________☐

possessive ________/________☐

count/non-count nouns ________/________☐

relat. clauses ________/________☐

<u>Comments</u>:

The portion at the top of the form (LEV: LB B FB/HB LI I HI L A HA) represents the level of the textbook as it is described in the textbook itself – low beginner to high advanced. The focus of this preliminary study was only on textbooks described as being for students from "low beginner" to "intermediate."

"FB" denotes the increasingly popular level definition, "false beginner" which one textbook's authors define as, "students who have studied English previously but who have not had much chance to actively use what they have learned,"[6] a definition that covers a large block, perhaps a majority of Japanese university English students, regardless of what they may actually be able to read, write, or understand.

Since verb forms are usually presented as the heart of grammar points, the form displays the various verb tenses in active and passive forms. In addition, modals and modal-like forms are shown. Finally, there is a grab bag of popular grammatical features under "Other" at the end of the evaluation form. The list of grammatical features was inspired by what was found in textbooks, but is not limited to them. There are a total of forty grammar points on the evaluation form.

Information about what grammar points are to be covered in each lesson is usually provided in the beginning of the book, in an index or plan for the book as a whole. Occasionally, however, it was necessary to look at each lesson and find what the grammatical themes were. Some authors did not present any grammatical themes for their textbook's lessons, and in these cases, I did not attempt to extrapolate one on my own. In evaluating a textbook, at first I assigned a score of 1 point for each grammatical feature listed in the book as being covered in a lesson. This scoring procedure gives a score of, for example, 24 points for *East West 1*, an Oxford publication. This total represents the number of grammatical points which are described in the lesson plans as being presented in the text. Thus, we can compare *East West 1*'s score of 24 in this textbook presented for false beginners with the score of 27 in *English Firsthand Plus*, a Lingual House publication, a score of 11 in *Lifelines 2*, a Regents publication, and a score of 28 for *Take Two*, a Macmillan issue. All of these textbooks are targeted at the "beginner" to "low intermediate" levels, some claiming to be targeted for a couple of these levels at the same time.

We can compare textbooks "rated" for similar levels by showing their scores in graph form. On the right [fig. 2] are the textbooks of the same or similar "level" by name in alphabetical order. The first heading, "Total Listed," is the total number of grammatical points said to be covered in the textbook's introductory plan or index or in each lesson. These constitute the grammatical "focus" of the text. The second heading, "Fit score," is the total score over the number of grammatical points which actually appear for the first time in the lesson indicated. In other words, if a textbook's lesson plan claims to be introducing the grammatical point in lesson 10, but it appears for the first time in lesson 3, one point is subtracted from the total score. The next heading is Percent represented by a percentage derived from the Fit Score. A 100% score in this column would mean that no grammatical form appeared in the textbook before it was intended to be introduced in the textbook's lesson plan. Finally, the last tally, Total Actual is the total number of grammatical points that actually appear in the text, regardless of whether they appear as a part of the grammatical focus or not.

fig. 2

Text	Total Listed	Fit Score	Percent	Total Actual
Coast to Coast 2	13	13/11	84.6	30
East West 1	24	24/15	62.5	27
E. Firsthand Plus	27	27/17	63.0	33
Express English 1	8	8/3	37.5	15
Interchange 1	22	22/12	54.5	25
Lifelines 2	11	11/7	63.6	21
Main Street	11	11/8	72.7	14
Take Two	28	28/9	32.1	36

These scores do not show the whole picture even though they are interesting in terms of how much authors think is important to teach students of the same "level." To adequately demonstrate how really different the text books are, we need to show where each derives its scores and how the materials are

presented, remembering all the while that the authors are targeting the same level of students.

The authors of *East West 1*, for example, feel that modals are important to the "false beginner," and derive 6 of their total points from this source. *Express English* at the other extreme gains only one point from modal instruction. The other texts are *Coast to Coast 2* = 1 (listed), 7 (actual), *English Firsthand Plus* = 7, *Interchange 1* = 5, *Lifelines 2* = 2, *Main Street* = 3, and *Take Two* = 7.

Most of the authors agree that the simple present tense with BE is something that should be covered in lesson 1. After that there is almost no agreement on the sequencing of presentation. Indeed, the authors of *English Firsthand Plus* cram coverage of no less than 13 grammatical points into the first two lessons (nine of them are shown in the chart below). Here [fig. 3] is a selection of grammatical items and their corresponding lesson numbers as they are described in the introductory lesson plan.

fig. 3

TEXT	Coast.	EW1	E.First.	Expr.	Inter.	Life.	Mn.St.	Take
past tense *BE*	X	5	X	13	7	2	X	X
" regular	X	5	1	15	7	1	X	8
" irregular	X	5	1	17	7	2	X	8
pres. cont.	1	6	2	11	9	14	13	9
past cont.	12	X	1	X	X	X	X	56
BE GOING TO	X	8	4	X	X	X	X	13
passive pres.	5	X	2	X	X	X	X	12
" past	5	X	11	X	X	X	X	22
pres. perf.	2	X	1	X	10	X	X	4
" " cont.	X	X	8	X	X	X	X	10
past. perf.	X	X	10	X	X	X	X	8
might	X	14	X	X	X	X	X	20
have to	X	9	3	X	X	X	X	35
comparative	8	11	2	X	14	X	X	11
superlative	9	11	1	X	14	X	X	11
tag questions	X	14	1	X	X	X	X	9

It is important to remember that these figures represent the numbers of the lessons in which the grammar point is said to be covered. Where there is an "X," it means that the grammar point indicated is not said to be covered in the textbook. It does not mean, however, that the grammar point does not appear. Similarly, the fact that a certain grammar point is said to appear in a given lesson is no guarantee that it will not show up before that point The "Fit score" above [fig. 2] is a clear indication of that.

Another point to consider in regards to grammatical focus is how much practice a student can get of the grammatical point through the exercises provided in the lesson. The only verb tense that all of the textbooks listed above presented in common was the present continuous tense. (Although the present tense of *BE* is not displayed in the chart above, it is not formally presented in three of the textbooks.)

Main Street, for example, introduces the present continuous tense in lesson 13 through the opening conversation where guests at a party are shown "to be wearing" different clothing. Exercise C (of A through E) affords two conversation practices based on the "wearing" theme. In the first, *A* asks, "What's he wearing?" In the second, *A* asks, "What's she wearing?" The exercises give eight and ten items respectively to practice, for a total of eighteen questions and answers. Exercise E involves a guessing game about the guests at the party. *A* describes the guests and *B* must guess who it is. *A* may use the present continuous tense to describe what the guest is wearing, but may also describe the guests without using the present continuous by using expressions such as, "He is tall. He has brown hair. His pants are blue." The verb "WEAR" is the only verb shown or offered to be practiced in the present continuous tense.[7]

Coast to Coast 2, on the other hand, mixes the present continuous tense with present tense questions in exercise 2 on the first page of lesson 1. Students are asked to make questions

such as, "Where do you live?" "What do you do?" and "Why are you wearing a sweater?"[8] In exercise 3, the present continuous is used in the question, "Why are you studying English?" On the second page of lesson 1, the past continuous and the future tense with *BE GOING TO* are added in exercise 1 (the exercise numbers start at 1 for each page of the text), an oral exercise, and exercise 3, a writing exercise. The present continuous is not called for in these two exercises. On the last two pages of lesson 1, the student is asked to practice the past tense of BE along with the past tenses of regular and other irregular verbs. The present continuous does not appear until the end of lesson 1 in a couple of small diagram boxes at the bottom of the page where it is displayed with the present tense, the past tense, and the future tense with *BE GOING TO* [fig. 4].

fig. 4

How often Why	do you go are you going	to English classes?

When	did is	Gary	visit going to visit	the North Pole?	A month ago. In two weeks.[9]

East West 1 presents the present continuous tense in lesson 6. It appears in the opening conversation with the verbs "GO," "TAKE," "DO," "LIVE," "RAISE," "WORK," "WAIT," and "SEE." Exercise 1 offers five opportunities to practice with the question, "What is ________ doing?" All five of them are taken from the pictures in the opening conversation. The cues are provided in the plain form of the verb. These are "WAIT," "LOOK," "WRITE," "SHOP," "PUT," and "TAKE." Exercise 2 offers 7 opportunities to practice with "What's ________ wearing?" Exercise 3 offers ten opportunities to practice with "What's ________ wearing?" Exercise 6 offers practice with a partner, "Am I wearing black shoes?" and so on. Exercise 7 offers a mixed exercise to use the present tense

and the present continuous tense, "What courses are you taking?" and "Who's teaching it?" about a class schedule in the textbook. Exercise 8 includes similar practice with the present continuous tense in questions about a different class schedule. Exercise 9 involves a question and answer exercise using the present continuous tense with the verbs, "DO," "STUDY," "LIVE," "WORK," and "LOOK." Exercise 11 offers students the opportunity to practice many of the same questions about each other, using the present continuous tense in some of them.[10]

Practice possibilities among these three books range from practice with one verb in two exercises in *Main Street*, to a mixed verb practice with three verbs in *Coast to Coast 2*, to practice with 15 verbs in eight exercises in *East West 1*. *Main Street* introduces the tense in lesson 13, *Coast to Coast 2* in lesson 1, and *East West 1* in lesson 6. Not only is there no agreement about when the present continuous tense should be presented, but there is also conflict on how much practice is necessary to "acquire" the verb tense and what other forms can be presented along with it without causing confusion. It is important to remember here that the present continuous tense was the only verb tense that all of the textbook authors agreed was worth presenting formally in their books. If we were to compare presentations of other grammatical forms, the confusing impression would be even more dramatically enhanced.

Clearly there is no clear strategy for introducing grammatical points: Which should be presented first? In what order should they be presented? What forms can be presented together without causing confusion? And most importantly, How much practice is necessary to acquire the forms being taught? The inability of text authors to agree on the answers to these questions in the development of their materials demonstrates the weakness of overall ESL textbook research and the apparent willingness of textbook authors to go ahead and produce materials without it.

Defenders of the present communicative textbook approach will ask, "So what if the grammar points appear at random. Isn't the purpose of the communicative approach not to stress grammatical repetitiousness but rather to provide realistic settings in which the language can be practiced?" Maybe. The second part of my study was to analyze the presentation of functions or communication points. While my list is hardly comprehensive, it does cover many of the communicative points and explicitly demonstrates the volume of the material that might be covered in a typical textbook at this level. The form I used for this evaluation is shown below [fig. 5].

fig. 5

TEXTBOOK ________ AUTHOR ________

PUB./DATE/ed ________

LEV: LB B FB/HB LI I HI LA A HA

FUNCTIONS/COMMUNICATION POINTS : (Lesson introduced)

advising ________

agreeing/disagreeing

  opinions ________

  suggestions ________

alphabet/spelling names ________

apologizing ________

appointments ________

asking for/giving information

  opinions ________

  personal ________

  travel ________

asking someone to do something ________

asking/giving permission ________

borrowing ________

checking into a hotel ________

comparing ________

complaining ________

congratulating ________

describing (past/present/future)

- activities __________
- directions __________
- events __________
- feelings __________
- instructions __________
- locations __________
- people __________
- problems __________
- things __________

goodbyes – formal/informal __________

greetings __________

insisting __________

introductions

- others – formal/informal __________
- self – formal/informal __________

invitations

- making __________
- accepting/declining __________

money __________

numbers

- addresses __________
- numbers __________
- telephone __________

persuading __________

phone – leaving/taking message __________

planning

- a party __________
- a tour __________

predictions __________

proposing course of action __________

reporting information __________

responding to good/bad news __________

restaurant __________

shopping (selling/buying) __________

showing concern __________
speculating about
someone's character __________
what something is __________
past, present, future possibilities __________
suggestions __________
thanking __________
time __________
Weights and measures (English) __________
CONVERSATION MANAGEMENT:
asking for repetition __________
discuss (sustaining conversation) __________
ending conversation __________
hesitating __________
interrupting __________
preventing interruption __________
starting conversation __________
COMMENTS:

Although my list was drawn in large measure from the textbooks themselves, in listing the lesson numbers for each of the functions, I very quickly realized that what is presented and the order of presentation both seem to be selected at random. Greetings and introductions, as could be expected, are usually covered in the first lesson or two, but there are exceptions to even this generalization. *East West 1* doesn't get around to greetings until lesson 3. Some textbooks, such as *Main Street*, cover only the most casual of greetings, the "Hi. My name's ____________" variety. Presumably expressions such as "Hello, how are you?" or "Hello, how's it going?" or "Hi, how're you doing?" are not appropriate for this communicative function. As with grammatical focus, it can be said that there appears to be no comprehensive strategy for the presentation format of almost any function or communicative point either. There is some vague agreement on what communicative points should be covered at this level. Most of the texts have some describing

activities, some asking for and giving information activities, and some practices with making suggestions. Of course there is considerable discrepancy on how the communicative points are presented. The general category "Describing," for example, covers no less than nine different, more specific topics and may involve practice with several different time concepts as shown in the evaluation form. The order of presentation also shows considerable variation. *Fast Forward 2* introduces the giving of directions in lesson 1, while *Main Street* presents that topic in lesson 16 (out of 20). *Take Two* doesn't present it at all. Most importantly, there is no accord on how much practice is necessary for the students to acquire the communicative functions being presented.

Comparative evaluation of textbooks for this so-called "beginner" to "low intermediate" levels clearly demonstrates the rudderlessness of current, materials-development theory. The shift from the audio-lingual approach which, despite its top-down nature and rigid instructional techniques, did at least have a presentation theory, to the "functional" or "communicative" approach which supposedly stresses the "interests and needs of the student"[11] has cut the bottom out of any cohesiveness of methodology.

It is my contention that one of the causes of this problem is that the English-learning population in Japan, one of the major markets for English teaching materials, in universities particularly, is largely passive, and unwilling or unable to be active agents in the learning process. At the university level in most EFL curricula this same uncertainty about the needs of the students persists and is not ameliorated by any countervailing input from the students themselves. In so-called English conversation schools too, the students may have more energy to do what is required of them in class, but I question whether many students– other than those in ESP programs – have established clear enough goals to let them or their teachers know what materials will satisfy their interests and needs.

Without critical goal input from the learner, the communicative approach goes centrifugal. Teachers and materials developers alike are forced into the role of having to make decisions about needs and interests for the learner – essentially in a vacuum. Usually we are unfocused. Frequently we are simply wrong. The most damaging aspect of this trend is that what most ESL/EFL teachers believe is essentially a learner-centered activity is gradually shifting back to the teacher-centered orientation of the grammar-translation approach or the audio-lingual method. Yes, we can get the students going in the classroom and stand back to watch them interact in English, but it is we who are setting the goals, and we who are defining the needs and interests of the students. The focus has turned from addressing the learner's own motivations to what method the teacher can use to motivate the class. The introductions of many textbooks, for example, emphasize how the activities in the textbook will motivate the students. In this environment, whether the interaction of the students results in acquisition or not is entirely coincidental and haphazard, depending on whether that one particular lesson, or even one particular exercise, catches the interest of the learners long enough for them to acquire something. The problem is only exacerbated by confusion among textbook authors as to what is worth presenting and how much practice is necessary to acquire it.

These problems with our profession can be clearly seen in almost any classroom, including my own. I am reminded of a class that I observed recently in Great Britain. The students had come a long way from various countries to learn English at the school, one of the oldest and best known in England. They all underwent a day-long placement procedure. All of them could go out and use the language they learned with native speakers in the "real world" right after class. All of them were staying at homestays. The teacher, well qualified and greatly experienced, was a professional in every respect. Part of the lesson I observed had the students practicing the phrases necessary

to ride the bus, asking where the bus was going, asking to be let down at a certain place and so on. Of this lower level class of 15, five of the students were aggressively practicing the material together in a role play activity. They listened to the teacher's explanations and corrections. They asked questions as best they could. They were the ones who probably came to the class by bus. Another seven would practice with the teacher, or when called upon to demonstrate the conversation, but were not actively involved. They probably walked to school. The remaining three were busy talking among themselves- in English- about what nightclub they would be going to that evening. Each of the latter three was from a different country. For many of the students, their needs and interests were not being addressed at all. This sort of breakdown is common in many classes, with the latter two groups dominating in some.

To answer the question posed by the title of this article, "Do we know what we are doing?" The answer is that we may on a micro level but not a macro level. We can keep some of our students interested all of the time, and all of the students interested some of the time, but it is difficult to keep all of the students interested all of the time. In fact, it is not really our business to "keep" the students in any way. Naturally a teacher can provide powerful incentives for students to learn, in terms of interesting lessons, concern for the students' development, and effectiveness in helping students to make progress. If we believe, however, that language learning is essentially a learner-centered activity, we must insist that students take a more active role or simply not study English.

As professional English teachers and materials developers we need to continue to apply pressure on those who establish curricula to make clear what the goals of the programs will be. These must include some student input. This means that students must not only be active in class, but also be able to say what sort of use they plan to make of the English they study.

Furthermore, if we are to retain our status as professionals, we must refrain from producing materials that reflect a greater interest in making money and gaining professional recognition than in producing seriously researched teaching technology. Even a casual glance at the myriad book catalogues and the scores of textbook offerings will demonstrate that many people are producing materials for classroom use. Too many of these authors are simply writing whatever pops into their heads, hoping to get their names in print and make a little money to boot. It is bad craftsmanship, and it is not particularly helpful to our professional reputation. Is it any wonder that many people believe that anyone who speaks English can teach it. If textbook writers don't know what they are doing how could anyone else do much worse? We teachers have been complacent in our critical evaluation of teaching materials and those who produce them, lulled into believing, perhaps, that volume and variety equal pertinence and quality.

Finally, it is my growing belief that we are too often premature in trying to teach "conversation" to students who do not have the basic language skills necessary to accommodate themselves to the free-wheeling nature of the conversation environment. A student who must have questions repeated several times or changed from information questions to simple YES/NO questions is simply not ready for "conversation," especially about a topic that may be of little interest or relevance. More training in listening, greater study of practical applications of grammar in writing or very controlled speaking environments, and practice in extensive as well as intensive reading appropriate to the students' level should be stressed before students are offered lengthy classes where they are confronted with an unstable conversation environment. Discussion, a topic based, speaking activity, seems focused enough to be taught to relatively advanced students, but "conversation," as this examination of textbooks has shown, simply may be too unstructured by nature to be of much use as a classroom subject.

While we make every effort to reform the structure of our teaching environment: fewer students, clearer goals, more usable physical facilities, we should not forget that what we do and the materials we use to do it must also be put to the same tests of reliability.

APPENDIX

List of textbooks analyzed:

Access to English: Starting Out
American Wow 1
Break Into English 1
Cambridge English Course 1
Coast to Coast 1
Coast to Coast 2
East West 1
English Firsthand Plus
Express English 1
Express English 2
Fast Forward 2
Getting Together
Interchange 1
Lifelines 2
Lifelines 3
Main Street 1
Take Two
Talking Time

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1. Susan Stempleski, Alison Rice, and Julia Falsetti, *Getting Together* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), p. v.
2. Val Black, Maggy McNorton, Angi Malderez, and Sue Parker, *Fast Forward USA* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 1 of Introduction.
3. Jack C. Richards, Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor, *Interchange 1* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1990), p. back cover.
4. Michael Coles and Basil Lord, *Access to English: Starting Out* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987) p. back cover.
5. Bernard Hartley and Peter Viney, *American Streamline Connections* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 7.
6. Kathleen Graves and David P. Rein, *East West 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) p. viii.
7. Peter Viney, Karen Viney and David P. Rein, *Main Street 1*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) pp. 44- 46.
8. Jeremy Harmer and Harold Sunguine, *Coast to Coast 2* (New York: Longman House, 1990) p. 4.
9. Ibid. p.7.
10. Kathleen Graves and David P. Rein, pp. 41-45.

11. Jack C. Richards, Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor, p. back cover.