

*A Comparison of High School English Textbooks in Japan, Korea, and China:
Do the Differences Significantly Affect the Outcomes?*

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Abstract

English education in Japan, Korea, and China may display certain similarities, since they are all fundamentally monolingual societies, where citizens may not have much need for English on a day-to-day basis. They are all now keen to take advantage of the opportunities of globalization and recognize the importance of English in this context. In all three countries, the English education system has recently moved towards more communicative approaches, with Korea perhaps originally leading the way in this (Yuasa, 2010). Japan still tends to rank lower on international measures for its citizens' English skills than China or Korea (So, 2019), despite promoting English language classes in primary schools since 2011. In China and Korea, compulsory English lessons begin in the 3rd grade of primary school, but not until fifth grade in Japan (as a fully-assessed academic subject, although "English Activities" classes begin in third grade since 2020). Textbooks and other learning materials play a significant role in school education, and their capacity to stimulate and motivate learners is especially crucial at the high school stage when students are reluctant to risk losing face in potentially embarrassing communication activities. So, if other conditions are similar, it seems possible that these materials may differ in some important way(s). This is the focus of our study, comparing typical high school textbooks from the three countries from the aspects of volume of English words used and sentences per book and per chapter, and the amount of visual illustration of all kinds relative to written text.

Keywords: English Textbooks, Proficiency, Country Comparisons, Exposure, Emphasis

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Introduction

English education in Japan, Korea, and China may display certain similarities, since they are all fundamentally monolingual societies, where many ordinary citizens may not have much need for English on a day-to-day basis. They all use non-alphabetic writing systems (although there are significant differences between them, which will be mentioned later in this paper). All three countries are now keen to take advantage of the opportunities of globalization, particularly in the areas of business and education, and recognize the importance of English in this context. In all three, the English education system has recently moved towards more communicative approaches (Kwon, 2009; Liu, 2009; Yamaoka, 2009) with Korea perhaps originally leading the way in this (Yuasa, 2010). Japan still tends to rank lower on international measures for its people's English skills than China or Korea (So, 2019), despite promoting English language classes in primary schools since 2011. Today, compulsory English lessons begin in the 3rd grade of primary school in China and Korea, but not until fifth grade in Japan (as a fully-assessed academic subject, although "English Activities" classes have begun in third grade since 2020).

Textbooks and other learning materials play a significant role in school education, and their capacity to stimulate and motivate learners is especially crucial at the high school stage when students are reluctant to risk losing face in potentially embarrassing communication activities. The materials' content can be an important source of information about the target language speakers and their cultures (Liu, 2009; Igarashi, 2022; Igarashi, 2023), and this is a key feature to appeal to young people learning English in a foreign language classroom, particularly where not all students have easy access to electronic devices and internet resources, or the inclination to make use of them to further their own learning (see Mao, 2020, on differences between urban and rural students' use possession and use of technology).

China has, undoubtedly, struggled most to overcome disparities in educational resources and achievement, owing to its huge geographical area, but much progress has been made since 1986, when the Compulsory Education Law was promulgated (China.org, n. d.). So, if other conditions are similar, it seems possible that these materials may differ in some important way(s). This is the focus of our study, comparing typical high school textbooks from the three countries from the aspects of volume of English words used per book chapter, number of sentences per page and per chapter, amount of visual illustration of all kinds relative to written text, and any special features that may be relevant.

It should be emphasized here perhaps that this is essentially an exploratory study, which should, hopefully, provide material or direction for further more in-depth research into relevant features.

1. Rationale for the Study

Japan ranked 80th out of 111 countries and regions whose native language is not English on the "English Proficiency Index" compiled by Switzerland-based EF Education First in 2022 (EF EPI, 2022). This placed it in the "Low Proficiency" bracket - "Low" being the second lowest of five groupings based on rank - and Japan's ranking is two places lower than the previous year, although the average score improved from 468 to 475. EF refers to "Japan's steady decline in English proficiency." This seems a little hard on Japan, although the

situation is shown quite dramatically in Fig. 1 below. Furthermore, the EF 2023 rankings indicate a further decline, to 87th out of 113 countries, with a score of only 457.

China, although also in the “Low” category at 62nd in 2022, with a score of 498, ranked 82nd in 2023, with a score of 464, and South Korea at 36th (score 537) in 2022 and 49th in 2023 with 525 (but still in the “Moderate Proficiency” level, according to the EF organization). Both continue to outperform Japan.

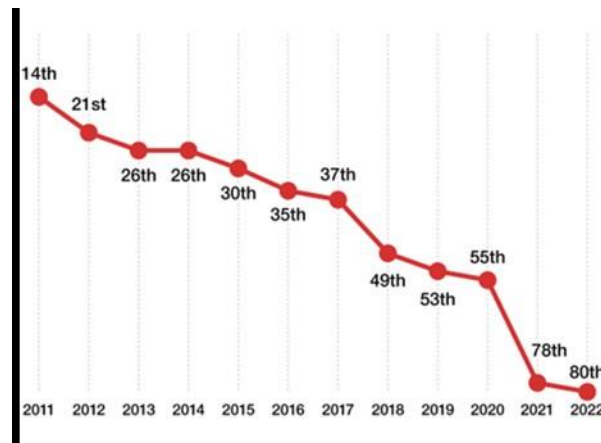


Figure 1: Japan’s EF English Proficiency Ranking (Source: Nippon.com)

The Netherlands took the top spot in the 2022 rankings (a lead it maintained in 2023), followed by Sweden in second and Norway in third place. Obviously, learners in these countries are in a very different position from students in Asian countries due to linguistic and cultural factors as well as geographical proximity to English-speaking people and environment. In fact, Asia’s regional average dropped slightly in 2022 and again this year, although three countries (Sri Lanka, Mongolia, and Kyrgyzstan) improved significantly and two more (Hong Kong and Vietnam) moved into a higher proficiency band in 2022. China and the Philippines were the main drivers of the declining regional score. Japan placed 15th among 23 Asian countries and regions, with South Korea and China in 5th and 14th positions respectively (China was 6th in 2022). Much of the decline in the 2023 rankings can be ascribed to the effects of COVID-19, which have disproportionately impacted the very significant 18-20 year old age band. Study abroad programs were cancelled and motivation severely affected.

While the EF Index does suffer from some shortcomings in terms of its methodology since instead of testing the level of English proficiency in the general population, it tests the level of English of those who self-select (Gazzola & Mazzacani, 2017), we feel that it does provide a measure that allows comparisons to be made. All the major internationally-recognized measures of English proficiency also suffer from the same biases, but provide at least some window on the actual situation, even if we need to be cautious about seeing their figures as representing the whole picture.

As far as basic teaching materials are concerned, in high schools across Japan, the use of government-approved textbooks is mandatory and most of the language input students receive is from these textbooks (Sugiura et al., 2020). This would appear to mirror quite closely the situation in China although in South Korea both prescribed and non-prescribed textbooks seem to be in common use (Song, 2021). Even in Japan, there is an element of choice available in that MEXT provides a list of over twenty books to choose from for 2nd-

year high school English Communication classes - 24 for academic year 2023 (MEXT, 2022). In South Korea and China, too there are different offerings from various publishers, although Yuasa (2010) does mention that there may not be such a wide selection available in South Korea. This appears to be similar to the situation in China (Mao, 2023).

MEXT's control of textbook content and format has been criticized over the years, and as recently as this year, Igarashi (2023) draws attention to the fact that the ministry's own language education policy of developing learners' intercultural communicative competence is not sufficiently reflected in the nine textbooks she examined from three different publishers.

2. Some Previous Studies Related to Textbooks in the Three Cultures

According to Yuasa (2010) aims differ for Korean and Japanese textbook producers, with the Korean materials' focus being on enabling learners to express themselves and exchange ideas in English, whereas their Japanese equivalents aim to stimulate students' interest in foreign culture and generally encourage a "communicative attitude".

Yuasa found that primary school children in Korea were much better prepared for English lessons at the higher level they would encounter in junior and senior high school than Japanese children of the same age, their English abilities already showing a noticeable difference which was linked to the level and types of language activity in their textbooks (Yuasa, 2010: 149). However, this difference was not observed at the senior high school stage, although the gap between junior and senior high school materials was larger in Japan.

All textbooks in the three countries emphasize the importance of learning about foreign cultures as well as language knowledge, and all of them include some focus on their native cultures in contrast to others. However, the Chinese seem to be more at pains to make sure that there is sufficient mention or illustration of Chinese elements. Lu and Wang (2020) state quite clearly that "The Chinese elements are a symbol and spiritual image, and a component of world element diversity". Lu and Wang do stress that they are concerned with improving teachers' cultural awareness in the context of English teaching and raising students' cross culture teaching and learning, but conclude that the proportion of Chinese elements presented should be increased. This was also supported by Shen (2019), who first describes how textbooks in the 2000s still tended to focus on language knowledge and cultural content was either lacking or not well organized. She expresses the view that EFL learners in senior high school need to "acquire a profound knowledge of culture in relation to native culture and target culture" in addition to a good command of linguistic knowledge. It is her belief that too much importance has been placed on target culture. In 2009, Liu was concerned about how the (then) new curriculum goal of Cultural Awareness – to include cultural knowledge and understanding, and also competence in cross-cultural communication – could be successfully implemented throughout China in view of the situation in which curriculum and textbooks changed, but not teaching methods, nor methods of assessment. His concern about the quality of teaching in rural versus urban areas, even though the same basic textbooks are set, is echoed years later by Mao (2018).

Kwon (2009) also mentions the significance of teacher training and abilities, referring to Korean English education. He does not consider that the government's solution of hiring English conversation instructors for schools would necessarily improve the standard of teaching, since individuals without formal teaching qualifications could be employed. Chang and Owada (2021) compared cultural diversity and cultural identity included in English

textbooks in Korea and Japan. They found that “both countries experienced cultural diversity through English education and introduced their cultural pride to Western culture to realize the goal of strengthening global capabilities.” They believe that English textbooks in both Korea and Japan are still firmly oriented toward American and British cultures. They also observe that there is a disconnect in terms of featuring cultural sections, but failing to relate them to the learners’ real-life experiences. They found that Japanese and Korean textbooks had similar formats and introduced cultural contents from many countries.

Both Chung and Owada (2021) and Igarashi (2022) advocate the need for textbooks to extend the range of English norms to include more diversity in varieties of English, especially from the outer/expanding circle. Igarashi quotes the MEXT (2012) goal of preparing learners to become part of a globalized world that is both linguistically and culturally diverse.

This brings us to our main question which concerns the relationship between the various forms of content and format of the textbook and outcome in terms of international rankings mentioned above.

3. Method

First, we must address the selection of textbooks for examination. Due to time restraints, affecting the availability of books and influenced by the fairly intensive nature of the study carried out, it was only possible to examine one textbook each from China and South Korea, as described here.

Two Japanese textbooks were examined, partly due to greater availability, but also since the Japanese materials were potentially contributing to poorer outcomes for their users than either the Korean or Chinese materials. The selection was based on comments from an experienced Japanese high school teacher (Igari, 2023) who has had the opportunity to use and assess various textbooks over her already long career. We chose to use those that were recommended, although our evaluation of some points might differ. The two books were *Crown: English Communication II*, published by Sanseido (Shimozaki, 2022), and *Vista: English Communication II*, also coincidentally published by Sanseido (Kaneko, 2022). *Crown* is a well-established series of English textbooks that have been employed in high schools for a very long time (we have in our possession a 1997 *New Crown* series, for example).

The Chinese textbook, *General English Textbooks (Compulsory), Level 2*, published by a division of the People’s Education Press, was selected mainly through the suggestion of Anyi Mao (one of the authors) and proved to be more readily available than other officially published textbooks. The Korean choice was also based on the information provided by a former Korean student one of us taught. From Song’s article, it appears that this is actually one of the non-prescribed books that is very widely used in the country (Song, 2021).

We began by considering relatively obvious points, including the appearance of the book covers and their size, and then counted and compared the number of units/chapters and the numbers of words and sentences used in each unit. We categorized words and sentences as carrying “main content” or serving purely “instructional” purposes, such as “Target”, “Activity” or “Exercise”. Words only listed in vocabulary lists in footnotes or side bars were not counted, although titles were included and captions with pictures, but not words that were part of a graphic illustration’s design. Common abbreviations, such as *etc.* and *e.g.* were

counted as one word. Dates, such as *March 25th 1915* were counted as three words, and personal names were counted only once when they appeared repeatedly as the participants in a scripted model conversation. Sentences was taken to mean only full grammatical sentences and not parts of sentences as appearing in the exercises, unless these were readily completed with one easy word or with words/phrases readily available on the same page. We also quantified as accurately as possible the percentage of pages given over to illustration, pictorial or diagrammatic (which was roughly calculated separately, although later combined for statistical assessment).

We also further noted any special characteristics in terms of unit/chapter content, inclusion of audio scripts for listening material, extra practice materials in addition to the regular units/chapters, and layout.

4. Findings and Discussion

It must first be made clear that, although we were able to calculate some statistics for the purposes of assessing any potential relationships, our sample of only four textbooks could not hope to provide us with would be reliable enough to expect genuinely significant correlations to be found. Our aim was to examine the data in terms of word and sentence totals, the average number of sentences per page and the use of pictures and diagrams to see if such contents were likely to affect students’ achievement in terms of EF EPI rankings or TOEIC scores.

The initial findings from the word and sentence counting can be found in Table 1 below, which for the sake of brevity does not include any of the category of “instructional” language.

Although the number of pages per book and the average number of sentences per page appear to be very obviously different, it must be borne in mind that the size of the pages was different for each country’s textbooks. The Japanese books were both B5 format, as were other Japanese textbooks we did not examine, while the Korean textbooks we saw were all A4, including this one. The two sets of Chinese materials we were eventually able to obtain, including the one we analyzed, were an unusual slightly elongated A4 size. So, while it is a fact that the Chinese book had by far the highest average number of sentences per page, the pages were much larger than those of the Japanese textbooks.

Title	Pages	Words	Sentences	Av. Sentences per Page	% of Pages Devoted to Pictures	% of Pages Devoted to Pictures incl. Diagrams	EF (2022) Score	EF (2023) Score	TOEIC Score (2022)		
									Listening	Reading	Total
Vista : English Communication II	98	8973	1018	10.39	20.07	20.69	475	457	309	252	561
Crown: English Communication II	168	28151	2445	12.75	28.27	29.73	475	457	309	252	561
High School English I	132	22135	1693	12.83	24.42	25.26	537	525	374	301	675
General English Textbook (Compulsory) Level 2	60	16548	1334	22.24	19.03	19.03	498	464	286	262	548

Table 1: Basic Findings
 (“Words” and “Sentences” in this table do not include instructional language.)

Our Japanese high school teacher informant (Igari, 2023) liked the *Vista* textbook because it had the vocabulary list in a side bar next to each reading passage, as well as at the end of the book, but it does mean that with the addition of footnotes the pages look rather cramped compared to the Chinese and Korean books, or even the *Crown* textbook. She found that the

Crown series was better suited to higher level students, especially those preparing to study English at university, since it was more intellectually stimulating. The *Vista* reading passages seemed especially designed for easier understanding, being printed in a larger font, with all instructional language being limited to either single word headings or two-word imperatives, such as “Study it!”. This textbook also contained a considerable amount of Japanese language on every page, including the labeling of countries on maps. *Crown*, in contrast, used side bars and footnotes sparingly, and made little use of Japanese. There are many pages without either of these features. On the other hand, *Crown* makes more use of tables and charts to present background information. *Vista* exhibits considerable regularity in page layout from unit to unit, which particularly affects the style and quantity of illustrations, unlike *Crown* which shows regularity in the first half of the book, but variety in unit length in the latter half (presumably when students are becoming accustomed to the format.) This allows for more variety in layout where use of illustrations is concerned, especially in Unit 6, first in the second half, which contains a special double-page spread in full color on the topic of the Sagrada Familia (Shimozaki, 2022: 110-111). *Crown* also features focused exposure to words and cultural concepts from languages other than English in Unit 1 and an optional extra lesson, which consists of a reading passage and comprehension questions.

Both *Vista* and *Crown* contain Appendices with vocabulary lists and the scripts for listening exercises. *Vista* also has four additional reading passages and *Crown* has model answers for the writing tasks. The vocabulary lists in *Crown* are organized as all vocabulary in each unit, functional expressions by the unit, and whole text vocabulary, which seems designed to make accessing words and expressions for later revision or further use easier. The number of units was similar, with eight in *Vista* and ten in *Crown*.

High School English 1 and *General English Level 2* had a smaller number of units, six and five, respectively, and in each textbook the length of all units was unvaried. *High School English 1* makes little use of Korean and *General English Level 2* contains almost no Chinese. This indicates an approach based on having learners see English as a fully functioning language from the outset, not simply a subject of study in school, which may be of limited usefulness outside the classroom. (Also largely true of the *Crown* textbook.) Both exhibit variety in terms of layout and size of illustrations, breaking up any monotony in page appearance.

In *High School English 1*, information is often arranged in the form of tables, perhaps for quick access, or to make it easier to remember. There is a “Click on Culture” section at the end of every unit, which focuses on aspects of Korean and other cultures. An especially noticeable feature in the Korean textbook is that web addresses are included for the sources of information in the main reading passages and “Click on Culture” sections in every unit. This suggests that students are encouraged to further their own research into the topics and also be used to the idea of needing to cite sources in their own writings. At the end of this textbook, there is a special lesson based on a movie – mainly dialog and listening comprehension, that is exercises using language. The Appendices contain scripts for listening activities and answers to all exercises, and full details of all sources for the “Click on Culture” information and photos used.

General English Level 2 is unique in featuring a video component as an integral part of every unit, at the end of each unit, and in having an integrated workbook at the end of the main text which contains a wealth of extra practice material for each unit, especially grammar, reading and writing. Unlike the other textbooks, the Appendices do not contain any audio scripts or answers to exercises. They do contain a general vocabulary list, lists of words and expressions

used in each unit, points of grammar, and a list of irregular verbs. There are also notes for each unit, explaining particular expressions, but mainly concerning background information.

Potential Correlations

	EF (2022) Score (Pearson's r)	EF (2023) Score (Pearson's r)	EF Main Indications (All results non-significant)	TOEIC Score (2022) (Pearson's r)	TOEIC Main Indications (All results non-significant)
Words	0.2028	0.2549	Small positive relationship	0.2806	Small positive relationship
Sentences	-0.0755	0.03375	Very small positive relationship	0.1121	Small positive relationship
Av. Sentences per Page	0.152	-0.1219	Very small negative relationship / Large positive relationship	<i>-0.3164</i>	Medium negative relationship
% of Pages Devoted to Pictures incl. Diagrams	-0.0208	0.1574	Small positive relationship	0.2801	Small positive relationship

* Figures in bold indicate a very small negative relationship, but this is viewed here as something of an anomaly, probably related to the very small number of cases being compared. The TOEIC result (in italics) is much more remarkable, however.

Table 2: Initial Examination for Potential Correlations with EF Rankings/TOEIC Scores

	EF (2022) Score (Pearson's r)	EF (2023) Score (Pearson's r)	EF Main Indications (All results non-significant)	TOEIC Score (2022) (Pearson's r)	TOEIC Main Indications (All results non-significant)
Av. Words per Unit	0.4606	0.6279	Medium → Large positive relationship	0.5158	Large positive relationship
Av. Sentences per Unit	0.7099	0.5991	Large positive relationship	0.4887	Medium positive relationship
Av. Sentences per Page	0.152	-0.1219	Small positive relationship → Very small negative relationship	<i>-0.3164</i>	Medium negative relationship
% of Pages Devoted to Pictures incl. Diagrams	-0.0208	0.2108	Very small negative relationship → Small positive relationship	0.2801	Small positive relationship

* Figures in bold indicate a very small negative relationship, but this is viewed here as something of an anomaly, probably related to the very small number of cases being compared. The TOEIC result (in italics) is much more remarkable, however.

Table 3: Examination for Potential Correlations with EF Rankings/TOEIC Score:
Average Words and Sentences per Unit

First, we tested for normal distribution using the Shapiro-Wilk test, which indicated a fairly normal distribution, although with the small number of groups compared caution is advisable. We calculated for both total word and sentence counts for the whole books and for the average number of words and sentences in each chapter or unit. As can be seen from Tables 2 and 3, there were no statistically significant results, but several noticeably more positive results in the case of average words and sentences per unit indicated potential relationships, which would require further investigation with a larger data set. The results for “Average Number of Sentences per Page” seem most unreliable, given how they vary from negative to positive on the different measures. The most promising relationship appears to be between “Words” and “Average Words per Unit” and the EF and TOEIC scores, which reinforces the idea of a link between exposure to volume of language and acquisition, echoing Kim and Krashen’s advice on extensive reading of over 25 years ago (Kim & Krashen, 1997). Exposure to more sentences is also beneficial, although a weakening effect which we originally observed for the inclusion of instructional language is likely to indicate that, in order to be of benefit, the exposure should be to full grammatical sentences that carry more meaning than only basic one- or two-word instructions. The effects for pictures seem to be quite positive overall, and may be increased

through encouraging students to interact with the content of illustrations and make connections with the information presented in other forms (See Ihata, 2017).

Conclusions

As expected, we cannot draw any firm conclusions from the present study, but it has been a useful exploration to suggest areas for further investigation and to encourage Japanese schools to make efforts to engage their students more actively in their own learning. Certainly, South Korea is achieving better outcomes for its English education than either Japan or China, perhaps as a result of its tendency to emphasize the practical use of the language through more output activities and an active learning approach that is already well-established in its materials. However, now that elementary schools in Japan are also focusing on English education more earnestly, we may begin to see improvement, especially as the effects of the coronavirus pandemic recede and study abroad programs and international travel in general resume and recover, increasing possibilities for university students and other young people in particular. For language learning of any kind to be effective, it needs to be seen as meaningful, and not only for passing tests (although that can also motivate some learners). Children and young people are naturally curious about the world around them and, increasingly, the world outside their immediate surroundings. Expanding the range of cultures from a focus on native anglophone countries may be a good way to stimulate English learning, as some researchers mentioned here have pointed out.

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