

A Study On English Language Textbooks Regarding Pragmatic Aspects “Closing Conversation” Situations In Textbooks In Japan

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Abstract

Textbooks play an important role in input in formal English instruction in any given countries. It is more so in Japan as most of the Japanese students have few opportunities to use English in their daily lives. However, as several previous studies have shown, language textbooks are not always accurate or sufficient, especially regarding presentation of pragmatic aspects. In Japan, all of the textbooks for 1-12 must be approved by the government so that they are written in accordance with the Education Ministry guidelines which determine the contents to teach each academic year. While the system has advantages such as some warranty of the quality, it also means rigidity in English education because teachers must use one of the textbooks.

This study has three aims; first, to investigate the government-authorized English textbooks about its information and presentation in terms of a pragmatic aspect, “closing conversation” situation, and second, to see how those textbooks have influence on the users. Finally, it aims to gain an insight from the data on how and what we, English instructors at college level, should teach.

To achieve the goal, seventeen textbooks for “Oral Communication I” course were investigated in terms of the amount and the contents of the pragmatic aspect. An oral survey using “think-aloud” protocol was also conducted and recorded to see how college English learners who used those textbooks close telephone conversations as well as why they choose to use the expressions or formula.

The results of the textbook research suggest that there is much room to improve regarding both amount and contents. The amount of “closing sections” which include at least “terminal exchanges” (e.g. “bye”) was minimal, and more than half of the textbooks had none. They simply lack the situation of closing conversation. The number of “complete closing”, a closing with three components: terminal exchange, pre-closing, and shutting down of the topic, was accordingly few, either. The contents also showed some discrepancy from the NS norms shown in the previous studies on closings; the word “well”, often used in closings by NSs was not included in any of the textbooks; only one textbook used “expressing joy for each other”(e.g. “Nice talking with you”), one of the most frequently used strategies by the NSs. On the other hand, “relaying messages” (e.g. “Say hello to Mr. Smith”) and “apologies” (e.g. “I’m sorry”), the strategies often used by the Japanese but not found in American data, appeared in the textbooks, suggesting the possibility of causing teaching-induced failures.

The data from the learner-survey showed that the learners do not have enough information about closing, and their closings were usually minimal and abrupt. Also, some of the students used apologies as a way to close conversation, saying they think they “learned” the expression in their high school English classes, which, therefore, can be examples of a teaching-induced error. Most of the subjects also felt that they had few chances to learn or carry out closings during their high

school lessons, and that it was extremely difficult for them to close conversation naturally. These comments seem to coincide with the results of the textbook research.

These outcomes clearly suggest the need of improvement in the textbooks. They might also suggest the high school teachers' lack of knowledge. It would be necessary to improve both textbooks and teacher education. In the meanwhile, we should be well aware that the students have not learned enough information on many of the basic pragmatic aspects. It is our duty to provide them with as many authentic opportunities as possible so that they can experience realistic conversation situations.