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First Steps towards Japanese Language Textbook Design:
Survey of textbooks and students' needs

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1. Introduction

This paper reports on a project to develop Japanese teaching materials at a UK university. The impetus for the project arose of out of an apparent lack of engaging and relevant teaching materials for our students, the majority of whom spend their Study Abroad year in Japan after just one year of Japanese study. We observe that there are innovations in language learning and teaching research that have not found their way into the Japanese language materials that we use, causing a mismatch between materials and our preferred teaching style which is grounded in communicative language methodology. This project hopes to bridge that gap by first surveying existing Japanese language materials and reflecting on their suitability for our course, and second using students-as-informers to identify their language needs. Together these represent a first step towards the creation of more targeted teaching materials.

At our institution we use a range of resources, selecting the most suitable parts from each for the needs of the students and supplementing these with our own materials. At beginners' level, the main textbook we used until recently was *Japanese for Busy People* (AJALT 2011). This offers a good grounding in grammar and contains explanations in English making it suitable for self-study. It is also reasonably priced for students and easily available. Another resource we used was the on-line resource *Erin's Challenge* (Japan Foundation, 2016). It is engaging and interactive with a range of teaching and learning materials, featuring a soap opera-style story of Erin who is newly arrived at a Japanese high school and her adventures. This academic year we have moved to *Marugoto* (Japan Foundation 2013) which is an engaging, colourful text with many on-line support materials.

We find that these resources have some limitations. *Japanese for Busy People* is aimed at an older age range than our students, with the situations presented in the book being more suited towards business people intending to live and work in Japan. *Erin's Challenge,* although engaging, is aimed primarily at secondary school age pupils, and, being a digital resource, offers few opportunities for learners to engage in self-expression or interaction. *Marugoto*, while being more communicative and innovative in its approach, seems to be aimed at a broader demographic and lacks English explanations of the grammar. None of these texts is designed to meet the needs of students like ours: university students, who go to Japan to study after just one year of Japanese language tuition. Student feedback on the texts – gathered through module evaluations, face to face comments etc., over the past few years – is variable and, unfortunately, many express dislike for the resources.

Our project focusses on two research questions:

1. Do any existing textbooks meet the needs of our students?
2. What content do our students need to prepare them for study abroad?

Using the data gathered from the project we hope to be able to design tailor-made materials or a text book which best suits the needs of our students. It is still in its early stages and we welcome comments and feedback from the wider teaching community.

2. Survey of existing textbooks

We conducted an analysis of the most widely available Japanese language textbooks in the UK which are

designed for classroom use and/or self-study. The list is not exhaustive but represents commonly used text books in the UK. We excluded informational books such as grammar books or books about slang, etc., from the selection. Individual levels of a series of books (for example *Japanese for Busy People 1, 2* and *3*) were counted as one book. The sample was of 15 books (or series of books). The books were then categorised into two groups: MFI (meaning-focused instruction) (Ellis and Shibatani 2014), that is to say that the books incorporated communicative activities and roleplays / tasks designed to replicate real life; and FFI (form focussed instruction) (Long 1998) where the lexical and grammatical forms are presented and practiced one by one, and "habits" formed by the completion of drills. As well as methodology, we looked at the target age range and suitability for students of the age range 18 – 30 preparing to go to Japan to study.

Book title	MFI	FFI	Target audience	Level
Instant Japanese (Tuttle)		X	General adults	Beginner
Japanese from Zero (YesJapan Corporation)		X	General adults	Beginner
Deai: The Lives of 7 Japanese High School Sudents (The Japan Forum)	X		High school	Advanced
Easy Japanese - A Direct Learning Approach (Tuttle)		X	General adults	Beginner
Basic Japanese, Practice Makes Perfect (McGraw-Hill Education)		X	General adults	Beginner
Decode にほんご (Author House)		X	General adults	Beginner
Colloquial Japanese (Routledge)		X	General adults	Beginner
みんなの日本語 (3A Corporation)		X	General adults	All
マンガでわかる実用敬語 (Tokyo Aruku Shohan)		X	General adults	Beginner
JAPANESE in 10 minutes a day (Bilingual Books)		X	General adults	Beginner
エリンが挑戦、にほんごできます (Bojinsha, Japan Foundation)	X	X	High school	Beginner
げんき 1 (Japan Times)	X	X	University students	All
Intermediate Japanese (Tuttle)	X	X	General adults	Intermediate
Japanese for Busy People (Kodansha)		X	Business people	All
Marugoto (Japan Foundation)	X		General adults	Beginner to intermediate A1 – A2

Of the 15 books, the majority (11) were FFI in approach, typically using the Audiolingual approach using drills to form language 'habits'. Typically they are organised according to a 'structural syllabus' where grammatical forms and expressions are presented and practiced one at a time. This does not tally with our understanding of language learning, which we see as slower and less linear than a progression 'from zero knowledge […] to mastery in one step' (Long & Robinson 1998: 17). Secondly, there is a reliance on model dialogues and drills, which we see as typical of the Audiolingual Method of language teaching. This dates from the 1960s and is based on a theory of language learning as habit formation which is not well supported by language learning research (Cook 2008: 244, Hall 2011: 88). Typically, in this style of book the chapters are all the same pattern consisting of dialogue – grammar explanation – drills – repeat. Any communicative tasks are very minor if they feature at all. Only *Genki* was aimed specifically at students of the age range we are interested in but was still influenced by FFI which does not suit our communicative teaching style. Other books were aimed at professionals, younger people or had a broad target demographic that covered all age ranges.

In fact, Iwata (2015) has shown that the five leading Japanese language textbooks published since 1990, which include *Genki* and *Minna no Nihongo*, are almost indistinguishable in terms of the forms (i.e. grammar points, expressions) that they cover. Not only do they overlap with each other; they are nearly unchanged from the forms that were covered in the two leading textbooks of the 1950s (Iwata 2015, Noda 2005: 1). What's more, textbooks that claim to follow a communicative Language Teaching approach, such as *Japanese for Everyone* and *Yookoso!* have been criticised for the limited extent to which they actually include Communicative Language Teaching activities (Parry 2000). Japanese language text books have also been criticised for giving the impression that there is a single 'correct' version of Japanese (Ando 2005, Kinoshita Thompson 2014, Matsumoto & Okamoto 2003) restricting learners' opportunities for self-expression (Kinoshita Thompson 2014). The language presented in textbooks does not always reflect current usage (Ando 2005, Kinoshita Thompson 2014), especially regarding sociolinguistic phenomena such as politeness, indirectness, self-effacement, formality and regional variation (Matsumoto & Okamoto 2003).

This confirmed the gap in the current provision of Japanese language materials viz. those books catering to the age group and specific needs of our students (university students, going to Japan after just one year of university study) which incorporate communicative, meaning-focussed instruction. In order to help us make decisions about the content we would like to see in teaching materials that fulfil the needs of our students, we decided to use our students as 'informers'. We believe our over-riding principle should be usefulness (Hall 2011: 203): in particular, usefulness for the year abroad. The following section describes our survey.

3. Survey of student needs

We wanted to find out in what situations students used Japanese whilst in Japan and what kind of language (phrases, grammar, vocabulary) they were able to use successfully in these situations, and what they felt had been lacking in their preparation.

We surveyed a total of nine students who were either in, or recently returned from, a period of study abroad in Japan. They had either just completed one year of Japanese study in the UK starting *ab initio*, or who had studied one year in a UK university having done some self-study before arrival. Their stay in Japan ranged from two weeks to a full year. We started with a small scale survey of students who had been on a two week summer school. Although we only received two responses they were still relevant and useful. We then used these results to improve our approach. We used a mixture of questionnaires, emails, and interviews, surveying some students once, and some twice.

Participant ID	Academic year / study abroad period	Ab initio at entry	Questionnaire	Interview in Japan	Interview on return
1	2014/15 short summer course	x	x		
2	2014/15 short summer course	x	x		

3	2015/16 one semester	Self-study	x		x
4	2015/16 one semester	x	x		x
5	2015/16 full year	x	x (email)		x
6	2015/16 one semester	x		x	x
7	2015/16 full year	x		x	x
8	2015/16 full year	x		x	
9	2015/16 full year	x			x

Our project is inspired by action research approaches which include 'adaptation of research processes and methods to address directly issues that emerge' (Burns 2010: 81). We have modified the data collection method (questionnaire, email, interview) and the focus (outside of classroom, interactions and relationships) to engage students and elicit relevant data. Although we have a small number of participants and there is some variation in the length of time the students spent in Japan, we have noticed a number of recurring themes in the responses, which we describe below.

We initially intended to encourage the students in Japan during the academic year 2015 – 2016 to fill in a questionnaire at regular intervals (see appendix). However, we had some difficulty engaging students: in total, four students responded once each. We tried suggesting that students send us an email detailing their Japanese language interaction experiences, both positive and negative, in case this elicited more responses than the questionnaire, but only received one further response (from a fifth student) in this format.

We then moved to an interview format. The second author interviewed three students while on a visit to Japan. This was conducted informally, with no recording, and the interviewer took notes. The students were very engaged and forthcoming. We therefore decided to interview all the students who were still in Japan when they returned to the UK. These interviews were semi-structured with questions focussing on interactions with people in Japan (friends, host family, strangers), asking how the students communicated, The topics used to start the discussion were as follows with follow up questions as required. The average length of interview was about 30 mins.

Friends: Tell us about friends in Japan - What opportunities did you have to make friends with home students? Was that enough? Did you have Japanese friends who spoke little / no English? How did you communicate? What kind of conversations did you have?

Homestay: Did you stay with a family at any point? How did you communicate with the family?

Everyday life: Did you have conversations with people in shops/ on the train/ in bars/ on the street? How was that? What did you feel about it?　Did you become a "regular" anywhere and get to know the staff? How did you communicate? What did you talk about?

What Japanese language structures and expressions were you able to use successfully? What did you feel unable to use?

We carried out a thematic analysis of all the data (questionnaires, emails and interviews) extracting the themes that emerged from the students' comments:

- non-standard forms such as casual language; the difference in register between the way young people speak in casual situations and the language of text books
- regional variation; similarly, students who were allocated host universities outside Tokyo noted a regional difference in language which they had been unaware before coming to Japan
- certain transactions; post office, bank, public transport, buying a bike, convenience store
- reading signs in public places such as stations

- talking to a host family; students reported that staying with a host family was often the only time they interacted at length with people who spoke no English at all
- cultural ambassador; describing their own culture to Japanese people
- code switching; students reported that most interactions involved code-switching (Japanese–English) and that monolingual interactions were relatively infrequent
- social media; students reported that many social interactions took place over social media notably *Line*, one of Japan's most popular instant messaging applications

4. Discussion

The survey of commonly used text books revealed that, although some of them have excellent features, there is no textbook easily available in the UK that matches both our preferred teaching style and the age and type of students that we are teaching. This reinforces our need to develop new, tailor-made materials. The survey of students needs revealed several topics or situations that are not covered by the materials we currently use. Some of these findings have already informed Japanese provision at our institution:

Language variation: we introduced sessions to raise students' awareness of language variation across Japan according to region, age, gender, register etc.

Transactions: we have incorporated into the course design more transactions which the students reported they engage in, such as post office, fast food outlet, etc.

Reading signs in public places: the need to be able to read certain signs in public places causes us to reconsider the type of kanji taught and the order in which they are taught, and how early in the syllabus kanji recognition of signs, for example, might be introduced.

Host family: under the overarching theme of "Homestay", we incorporated a range of language into the lessons, from functional language such as asking permission or offering to do things to making small talk and being a "cultural ambassador" for your own country (describing British customs, food, family life). By grouping the target language and structures to a particular topic, the students are better able to see the relevance of learning the language rather than learning it in isolation.

In addition, we are planning to introduce further developments into our curriculum to reflect the following:

Code switching: Although code switching has traditionally been discouraged in the classroom, the students' comments remind us of the argument in Cook (2008: 172–173) that the goal of language teaching is to produce bilingual speakers not 'imitation' native speakers. We therefore plan to introduce some activities that deliberately make use of both languages, such as interviewing someone in one language and writing a report on the interview in the other (Cook 2008: 178).

Social media usage: Widespread use of social media has implications for the use of technology in the classroom and the relative usefulness of handwriting over the ability to use Japanese input methods on mobile phones etc. As with reading signs, the ability to recognise and understand kanji far outweighs ability to write them.

5. Future developments

The first development for the future is to continue to work closely with students using them as co-creators enabling them to collaborate in the production of the materials drawing on their experiences and needs. We will evolve from small tweaks in the language provision to considering how to create an entire course and in the long run materials / a text book for in-house use or publication. In consultation with students, we will also consider whether the materials should be self-study or classroom based, digital or paper based, etc. In addition, although our survey was designed to investigate what language students needed outside the classroom, they also remarked on situations that arose in the classroom. One question we anticipate having to return to is to what extent we

should prepare our students for the Japanese language classroom in Japan, and to what extent our priority should be the world outside the classroom. Although we wish to argue strongly for the latter at this stage, we realise that the more immediate needs of the classroom may be more persuasive for our students. We are also aware that it is not possible or desirable to pre-empt every real-life encounter a student may have, and so future research could investigate which language is easily acquired while in Japan and what language would be better pre-taught. We hope to engage the wider Japanese teaching community in this discussion through publication of our findings and attendance at conferences; we welcome any feedback from our Japanese-teaching colleagues.

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Appendix:

Japanese text book project: Language needs survey

We are planning to develop a tailor-made textbook for York St John students intending to go to Japan in their second year. We feel that there is a mismatch between the content of current textbooks available and what students actually need when they are in Japan. So we are interested to hear from you about the kind of situations where you actually needed to use Japanese.

We would like to hear about <u>real-life situations,</u> not the Japanese you had to use in the classroom! When did you use Japanese around town, with friends, etc, and what Japanese did you use? Please let us know using the following form, return the completed form to m.murata@yorksj.ac.uk

Thank you for your cooperation

Mary Murata and Becky Taylor

1. List some situations where you had the opportunity to use Japanese **outside the classroom.**
   Give details of the language you used successfully. What vocabulary, grammar, phrases etc did you use?
   Did you use polite form or casual form?   Add more boxes as required.

Situation	Language	Was it reading/ writing or speaking / listening?

2. List situations in which you struggled to use Japanese and explain why. Give details. Add more boxes as required.

Situation	Problem arising	Was it reading/ writing or speaking / listening?