

The Need for Spoken Japanese Education in Japan's High Schools

Yukiko YAMAMOTO

Abstract

During my many years of teaching Japanese university students, it has become apparent that these students consistently seem to be lacking in speaking ability in general or verbal explanatory skills. I examine here my hypothesis that these inadequacies derive from Japan's high school national language education system. I analyze the oral expression instruction section of Japan's high school Japanese language textbooks, corresponding sections in teachers' guides, and supplementary materials. The results indicate that although expression is covered in the example textbook section chosen for analysis, 'Integrated Japanese', which is compulsory in the first year of high school, it accounts for just 15% of the entire subject and the 'Expression' section overall is lacking in both quantity and content. Moreover, the 2008 National Center Test questions concerned only modern literature reading comprehension; thus, it is probable that the 'Expression' section will be omitted from high school lessons during exam preparation. There is no relationship between the 'Expression' section and the 'Contemporary Literature' section which aims to teach reading comprehension. This effectively precludes the prospect of comprehensive, functional learning that combines the four skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Some suggestions for the way forward are presented.

Keywords: speaking, high school, Japan, spoken Japanese, national language, education system

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1. Introduction

The impetus for this article derives from the following thought processes. The first originates with a section from ‘The Fall of the Japanese Language in the Age of English’ by Minae Mizumura¹ which captured my interest. This book was a bestseller in Japan (50,000 copies published as of July 1, 2009) and also had a major international impact. The section that particularly caught my attention was ‘Above all, Japanese people should learn how to use the Japanese language... and Japanese has a long tradition as a *written language*’ (underline added). Mizumura also cites ‘Sanshiro’ by Natsume Soseki and ‘Takekurabe’ by Ichiyo Higuchi as examples of literature which Japanese ought to study. Mizumura taught contemporary Japanese literature at U.S. universities and has also published the sequel to Natsume Soseki’s ‘Light and Darkness’, so these comments come as no surprise given her background.

However, I had my doubts about these statements by Mizumura, doubts which are based on my experience teaching at a Japanese university. Since 2001, I have been teaching the subject ‘Japanese Language & Affairs’ to international students and since 2005, I have been teaching ‘Basic Seminar’, a basic humanities course covering Japanese essay writing, note taking, and three-minute speeches. My considerable years of teaching Japanese to international and Japanese students have

¹ Mizumura, *The Death of Japanese*, 290.

made me acutely aware not of Mizumura's suggestion that Japanese people ought to master Japanese with its considerable history as a written language, but rather that Japanese university students are utterly lacking in speaking ability in general or verbal explanatory skills. I believe that the root of these inadequacies lies in Japan's high school national language (i.e. Japanese) education system and I have therefore attempted to analyze, explain, and describe the following matters.

This article presents, firstly, my analysis of the oral expression instruction section of Japan's high school Japanese language textbooks and then, for each of these textbooks, the analysis of the same section in the 'Annual Teaching Plan' and the 'Syllabus Preparation Guide' (i.e. textbook usage instructions) which are released by the textbook publishers for use by high school Japanese language educators. I then explain general high school Japanese language subjects, and describe the content of Japanese questions appearing on the 2008 National Center Test (the standardized preliminary examination for university applicants) and the 'Integrated Japanese' section of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT)'s 'High School Curriculum Guidelines'² as supplementary materials.

2. Japanese high school (general) language subjects

Table 1 lists the compulsory high school general Japanese language subjects, of which 'Integrated Japanese' is a compulsory course accounting for as many as four academic credits. This course is also significantly related to the scope of the National Center Test, as I will explain later. I therefore selected the 'Integrated Japanese' textbook as the focus of my analysis.

Table 1. Japanese high school general language subjects

General education subject	Subject course	Standard credits	Compulsory course
Japanese Language	Language Expression I (1st yr)	2 credits	1 course from either 'Language Expression I' or 'Integrated Japanese'
	Language Expression II (3rd yr)	2 credits	
	Integrated Japanese (1st yr)	4 credits	
	Contemporary Japanese (2nd yr)	4 credits	
	Classics (2nd yr)	4 credits	
	Appreciation of the Classics (3rd yr)	2 credits	

Note: One subject credit is equivalent to 35 weeks (one academic year) of 50-minute lessons. (Source: 2002 MEXT 'High School Curriculum Guidelines' and explanation)

² Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, High School Curriculum Guidelines.

3. Target of analysis

The ‘Integrated Japanese’ textbook comprises two parts, ‘Classics’ and ‘Contemporary Literature and Expression’. Here I will analyze the ‘Contemporary Literature and Expression’ text which incorporates the section on Japanese oral expression instruction including ‘speaking’ and ‘verbal explanations’.

Currently, 10 publishers are responsible for the 27 ‘Integrated Japanese’ textbooks used in Japanese high schools. In the present study, I have analyzed one of these publishers’ textbooks, ‘*Tankyu Integrated Japanese (Contemporary Literature and Expression)*’³, which was certified by MEXT in 2006 and released in 2007, as well as analyzed the related documentation ‘Annual Teaching Plan and Syllabus Preparation Guide’⁴.

4. Analysis method

I adopted the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach for the analysis. According to Noro⁵, CDA is an approach which critically analyzes discourse implying unequal power relationships and clarifies the predominant ideologies and social inequalities therein, and is used particularly in the analysis of racial and gender discrimination, the formation of patriotism, and educational inequality. I therefore considered CDA to be a suitable approach for the subject analysis.

5. Analytical criteria

The following items were subjected to analysis. In the oral expression instruction section of the ‘Contemporary Literature and Expression’ textbook, the items were (1) Number of pages, (2) Layout of the table of contents (TOC), (3) Text font size ratios, and (4) Content and its relationship to other sections, and in the ‘Annual Teaching Plan and Syllabus Preparation Guide’, I analyzed (5) the content of the oral expression instruction section and its relationship to other sections.

3 Kamei & Nakano, *Tankyu Integrated Japanese (Contemporary Literature & Expression)*, Revised Edition.

4 Kirihara Shoten, *Annual Teaching Plan and Syllabus Preparation Guide*.

5 Noro, ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’, 13-49.

6. Results

6.1 Number of pages

Firstly, 38 of the textbook's entire 245 pages were devoted to expression (see Figure 1 for a detailed breakdown), of which 13 pages (34%) provided instruction on oral expression.

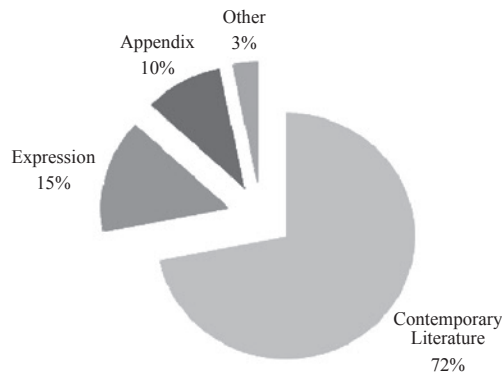


Figure 1. Ratio of pages dedicated to each section of the text.

6.2 TOC layout and text font size ratios

The textbook's TOC page layout and text font size ratios (A4 horizontal and vertical text) are shown in Figure 2, which reveals how little importance has been attributed to expression.

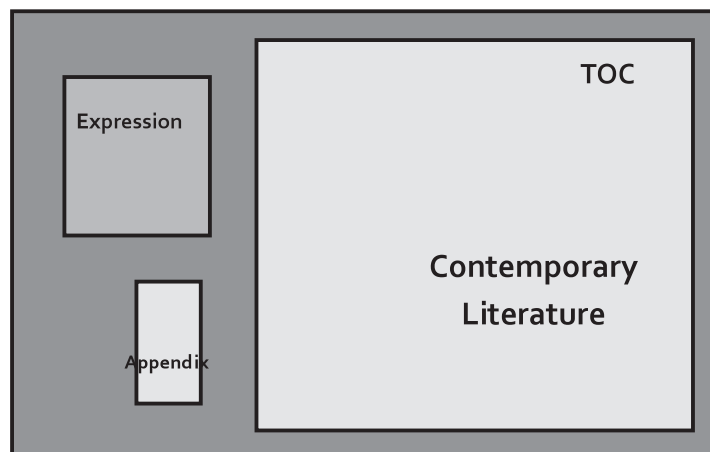


Figure 2. Diagrammatic representation of the Table of Contents page layout and text font size ratios.

6.3 Textbook content and relationship to other sections

As is apparent from the TOC layout, no relationship is implied between the content of the ‘Contemporary Literature’ and ‘Expression’ sections, with ‘Expression’ appearing later in the text as if it were an afterthought.

Examining the contents in greater detail, we can see that the ‘Contemporary Literature’ section, which comprises 72% of the entire text, deals with essays followed by novels, critiques, and poetry (*tanka* and *haiku*) respectively, all of which are reading comprehension topics. Despite appearing under the title of ‘Contemporary Literature’, all of the 19 listed authors except the *tanka* and *haiku* poets published their works up to almost 70 years ago, including Natsume Soseki from the Meiji period, Ryūnosuke Akutagawa and Kenji Miyazawa from the Taisho period, and Tatsuji Miyoshi and Osamu Dazai from the pre-war Showa era. Based on this fact alone, it appears that Mizumura’s concerns are unwarranted.

In contrast, the ‘Expression’ section, which comprises 15% of the entire text, intersperses four speaking genres, namely, speeches, interviews, debates and presentations, among seven writing genres (summarizing, copy writing, opinion pieces, etc.). Each part is presented in just a 2-4 page spread with examples at the top of the page and an explanation of its main usages underneath. The remainder appears to be left to the teacher’s discretion.

6.4 Content of Annual Teaching Plan and its relationship to other sections

There also does not appear to be any organized relationship between the content of the respective sections in terms of the textbook’s intended practical usage. The ‘Contemporary Literature’ section is a mixture of essays, Japanese Classics, Chinese Classics and so forth, while ‘Making presentations’ in the ‘Expression’ section is simply inserted without any surrounding context, as is evident in the ‘Annual Teaching Plan’ shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Annual Teaching Plan; *Tankyu* Integrated Japanese Revised Edition

	Unit	Unit objective
Feb'	Contemporary Literature [Novels III]: ‘ <i>Fugaku Hyakkei</i> ’ (‘One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji’)	Omitted
	Expression [Expression 10]: Giving a presentation	Omitted
	Classical Literature [Waka & Haikai poetry]: <i>Shin Kokin Wakashu</i> (New Collection from Ancient & Modern Japanese Poetry)	Omitted
	Classics/ Classical Chinese Literature [The Mencius] : Mencius	Omitted

(Source: *Kirihara Shoten* website (with partial extracts, omissions, and revisions))

6.5 Supplementary analysis: the National Center Test

I also include here mention of the National Center Test to supplement my analysis. The National Center Test for University Admissions is a common examination for entry to Japanese universities which is taken by a considerable number of high school applicants.

The 'Japanese Language' section of the National Center Test (200 questions; 80 minutes) is divided into 'Integrated Japanese' and 'Japanese Expression I' and covers modern writing and classics (i.e., Japanese and Chinese classical literature).

There were three questions on modern writing in the 'Japanese Language' section of the 2008 National Center Test, of which the second question was about Natsume Soseki's work '*Higan Sugi Made*' ('Until after the Spring Equinox'). Meanwhile, the first question concerned a critique with an underlying emphasis on modern literature while the third question concerned novels with an emphasis on written language. All of the questions thus related to reading comprehension and grammar, and none of them related to expression. The nature of these test questions also tends to suggest that Mizumura's comments have missed the mark.

7. Discussion

Based on the analysis results described above, we can make the following observations. Although expression is covered in the textbook for 'Integrated Japanese', which is compulsory in the first year of high school, it is taught towards the end of the curriculum and accounts for just 15% of the entire subject. Of this, lessons on expression to improve speaking ability and oral skills comprise just 34%, or a mere 5% of the entire subject. The 'Expression' section is therefore lacking not only in terms of quantity but also content, as only the basic steps are covered without any prospect of providing adequate oral skill training.

Furthermore, the questions on the National Center Test which Japanese high school students aspire to take are concerned solely with modern literature reading comprehension. This means that when it comes time to prepare for the test, it is highly likely that the 'Expression' section will be omitted from high school lessons.

There is also no relationship between the 'Expression' section, either in terms of the textbook content or the way the classes are taught, and the 'Contemporary Literature' section which aims to teach reading comprehension. This effectively precludes the prospect of comprehensive, functional learning combining the four skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing.

The section on 'Integrated Japanese' in MEXT's 'High School Curriculum Guidelines'

contains entries on ‘speaking and listening’. Although the Guidelines list ‘speeches’, ‘explaining’, ‘reporting’, ‘presenting’, ‘discussing’, and ‘debating’ as specific ‘language activities’, the teaching of these skills is severely hampered by the 15 credit quota (one credit = 50 minute lesson) because there is simply not enough lesson time to teach individual students all of these targeted language activities.

In addition, the Japanese language questions on the National Center Test focus exclusively on reading comprehension and grammar. High school students who wish to enter university will therefore undoubtedly devote their study efforts to reading comprehension and grammar questions. This begs the question, ‘To what extent are high school students aware of the importance of improving their Japanese speaking ability in general and more specifically their verbal explanatory skills?’ The fact is that students will become painfully aware of just how important these skills are when they attend university, search for a job, and begin their professional careers.

Unless there are proficient teachers capable of making high school students aware of the importance of Japanese oral skills, it will be difficult to integrate oral skills training into high school language lessons under the current situation where these skills are irrelevant to university entrance exams and are deemed as serving no purpose whatsoever.

Japan’s high school language textbooks could also do with some improvements. Regardless of the fact that they are first-language textbooks, a comparison with second-language texts which combine the four skills of reading, listening, speaking, and writing reveals them to be poorly conceived and amateurish. Even first-language acquisition requires training in these skills to a certain extent. If requested, Japanese language teachers who teach Japanese as a second language could help to improve the state of Japanese language education in Japan’s high schools including textbooks. However, there is currently no organized interaction between educators who teach Japanese as a first language and those who teach it as a second language.

We can therefore see that Mizumura’s statements were unfounded, and that the prospect of relying on Japanese high school language education in its present form to improve Japanese people’s speaking ability in general and specifically their verbal explanatory skills is virtually non-existent.

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