

Textbook Revision in the EDC Context: Lesson Activities

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the basic structure of a regular lesson in English Discussion Class (EDC), a compulsory speaking course for all first year students at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan, as reflected in course-specific textbooks. The principles and rationale for the design of each textbook activity are then briefly described. Finally, an overview of the textbook revision process is provided.

INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, and Culture's (MEXT) 1992 memorandum on *The Course of Study for Senior High School*, the English Discussion Class (EDC) program at Rikkyo University aims to develop students' speaking fluency and ability to discuss a range of topics in English so they may become "confident and capable communicators" (Hurling, 2012, p. 1.2). MEXT's more recent *New Course of Study 2009 for Foreign Languages: English* explicitly advocates a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach and aims to "develop students' communication abilities such as accurately understanding and appropriately conveying information, ideas, etc., deepening their understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude towards communication" (MEXT as cited in Underwood, 2012).

The EDC curriculum employs a CLT approach to maximize meaningful student-to-student interaction with a high degree of target language repetition to encourage automaticity and improve overall speaking fluency and communicative competence (Hurling, 2012). Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, and Thurrell (1995) note the relative nature of applying any given model of communicative competence, and so an ongoing concern of Program Managers (PMs) has been to assess and revise both the curriculum and course materials in an effort to keep EDC compatible with the shifting local context (c.f. Richards, 2006).

This concern is clearly reflected in the development of two EDC-specific textbooks, *What Do You Think? Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion 1* (Hurling, Doe & Takayama, 2010a), using in the first semester, and *What Do You Think? Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion 2* (Hurling, Doe & Takayama, 2010b), used in the fall. EDC students are placed in one of four proficiency levels based on TOEIC reading and listening scores, and each textbook is graded to that level and designed to meet the learning objectives laid out by the course creators (Hurling, 2012). PMs systematically review and revise all eight textbooks on an annual basis to ensure that these materials continue to meet both student and program needs in an evolving local context.

Hurling (2012) provides a list of principles that were followed in the creation of the original textbooks:

- a) Materials are practical (can be completed by students in- or outside of the classroom)
- b) Materials are brief (they aim to guide the production of language, not dictate classroom behavior)
- c) Materials are consistent (they all contain similar target language, practice activities, and prompts)
- d) Materials are appropriate graded (they contain achievable and realistic outcomes)
- e) Materials are aligned with course goals and learning objectives
- f) Materials reflect current knowledge of language learning.

The format of each textbook unit has changed very little since the first edition, and each component of those units follow these six principles to varying degrees.

Every version of the EDC textbook consists of twelve units divided into three sections of four units. In each block of four units, the first three present target language that satisfy some number of the 26 cognitive objectives listed by Hurling (2012). The fourth unit in each four-unit block introduces no new target language and concludes with discussion questions for a discussion test, a more heavily weighted means of assessment than regular lessons that uses criterion-referenced measures to assess students’ cumulative knowledge of and ability to appropriately use all previously learned target language in a controlled testing environment (Doe, 2012).

REGULAR LESSON STRUCTURE

The progression of a regular EDC lesson from the presentation of the target language through free production in an extended group discussion reflects a classic PPP lesson model generally “associated with Situational Language Teaching in the 1950s and 1960s” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 47). However, it can just as well be described in terms of skill learning theory as described by Dörnyei (2009) or the ACCESS methodology outlined by Gathbonton and Segalowitz (2005). Indeed, principles from both of these alternative frameworks inform discrete activity design within the EDC curriculum.

Table 1. A regular EDC lesson framed by different methodologies.

Regular EDC Lesson Stage	P-P-P Phases	Skill Learning Theory Stages	ACCESS Stages
Function Presentation	Presentation Phase	Declarative Input Stage	Creative Automatization Phase (CAP)
Function Practice	Practice Phase	Controlled Practice Stage	CAP & Language Consolidation Phase (LCP)
Discussions 1 & 2	Production Phase	Open-ended Practice Stage	LCP & Free Communication Phase

As part of the unified curriculum, EDC instructors are trained through orientation and regular faculty development sessions to follow this structure and apply CLT principles. The design of every regular textbook unit mirrors this structure, and a teacher’s guide accompanies each new edition of the textbook to explain the principles of activity design. All in-class activities are designed to promote repetition of content and target language, as a great amount of speech production in a controlled environment is required for improving communicative competence (Ellis, 2002, as cited in Hurling, 2012) and sustaining use in an ordinary context (Nation, 2001, as cited in Hurling, 2012).

Homework Reading

All units begin with a homework reading intended to “build topic familiarity, activate schemata, and provide content that can be used during in-class discussion” (Young, 2016, p. 296). As EDC aims to develop students’ speaking fluency and enable them to discuss a variety of topics in English, homework readings are written to be easily comprehended rather than promote reading skills. This is further in keeping with a wide body of research that supports simplified texts’

superiority over authentic texts for language learners (Allen & Widdowson, 1979; Crossley et al., 2007). Since the 6th edition of *What Do You Think? Interactive Skills for Effective Discussion 2* (Lesley et al., 2016), homework readings have been consistently and appropriately graded using Flesch-Kincaid readability scores and lexile thresholds to meet text coverage targets (Young, 2016). “Before Reading” questions precede each homework reading and aim to improve comprehension by helping students predict content; “After Reading” questions invite students to reflect on the homework and generate ideas that can be used during in-class discussion, a design that is in keeping with the principle of combining meaning-focused input with meaning-focused output as outlined by Nation (2009).

Introduction of Target Language

The first major component of the in-class portion of a regular textbook unit is the presentation of the target language, which in the EDC curriculum takes the form of lexical clusters presented as interactional, formulaic function phrases (c.f. Celce-Murcia, 2007; Dörnyei, 2009). These function phrases are listed according to performance role (listener and speaker) and are then presented in a model dialogue. Richards (2006) makes the case that the “important point about textbook dialogues is not that they model ‘authentic’ conversational interaction, but rather that they provide a springboard for follow-up activities” (p. 20). Following the model dialogue, a “Remember!” box briefly lists how to use the target language appropriately and why it is useful in English discussions. This box serves to clarify these aspects of the target language for learners and aid the instructor in presenting it to the students.

Practice Activities

Following the introduction of the target language, a gap-fill activity (omitted from Level I textbooks) provides a controlled practice to manipulate the target language. A second, semi-controlled practice consists of four open questions designed to elicit use of the target language that is genuinely communicative and psychologically authentic, focused and formulaic, and inherently repetitive. Such design follows principles for promoting creative automaticity as outlined by Gathbonton & Segalowitz (1988), as well as provides “opportunities for abundant repetition within a narrow context” (Dörnyei, 2009, p. 39). Question format may change from unit to unit in order to better elicit focused repetition of that lesson’s target language.

3/2/1 Fluency

Two 3/2/1 fluency questions (three for Level IV textbooks) appear below the practice activities in a regular textbook unit. These questions are used for a 3/2/1 fluency practice, adapted from Maurice’s (1983) 4/3/2 activity. While this activity is typically performed at the beginning of an EDC lesson, the questions appear here for reasons related to formatting and space. Questions are written to be meaning-focused and on familiar topics within students’ previous experience (Nation & Newton, 2009).

Discussion Activities

The final two pages of each regular lesson textbook unit consist of two discussion activities referred to simply as Discussion 1 and Discussion 2. Each Discussion is broken into two parts: a preparation phase in which students work with a partner to generate content that can then be used in the second phase, an extended group discussion between three to five members. This process follows Nation’s (2001) principles of repetition and meaning-focused output as discussed by Hurling (2012). In addition, all prompts and questions relate directly to content included in the homework reading. Such linkage is in accordance with Nation’s (2009) principle of combining

meaning-focused input with meaning-focused output, wherein the content read previously can be carried over to aid in other language skills.

TEXTBOOK REVISION

Each edition of the EDC textbook is revised on an annual basis in order to remain compatible with the changing local context. The revision process therefore reflects the development of curricular principles while adhering to the original objectives of the course and furthering overall course aims. This revision cycle is described in Figure 1 below.

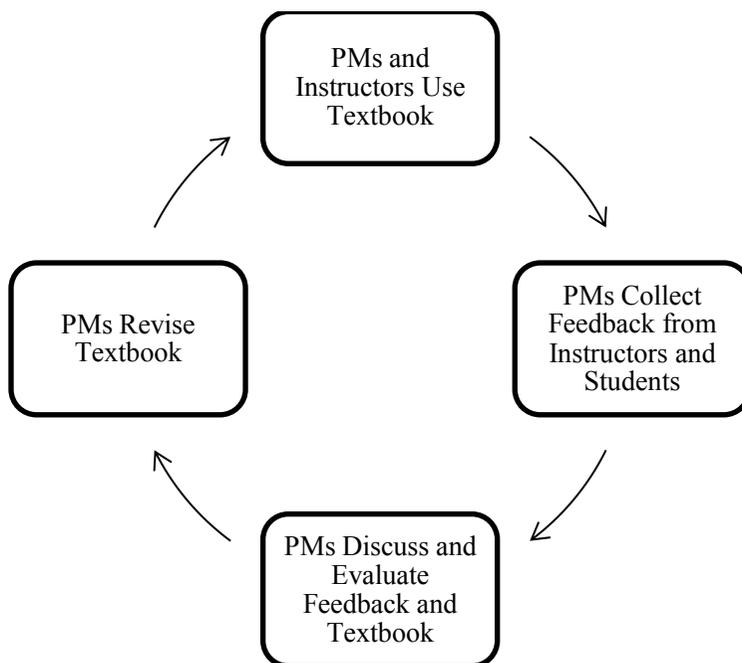


Figure 1. EDC textbook revision cycle.

There are a number of tools available to PMs when conducting textbook evaluation and revision, all of which fall under one of the three strands described in Figure 2.

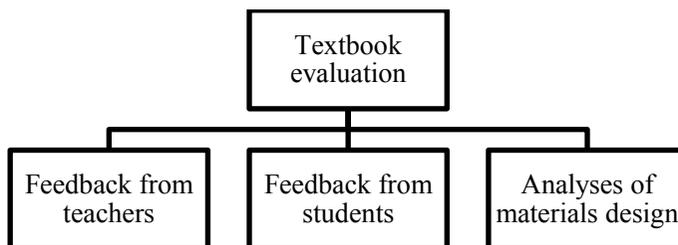


Figure 2. Three strands of textbook evaluation.

Arguably, the most important means of evaluation is feedback from teachers. EDC instructors are on the front line, teaching as many as fourteen 90-minute lessons per week. Each

semester, instructors are encouraged to keep notes on what aspects of each textbook unit are or are not effective or appropriate. At the end of each semester, instructors then complete a comprehensive textbook feedback form in which they rate discrete aspects of each unit and suggest revisions justified by the needs of the local context and/or current language teaching research. PMs then conduct a qualitative analysis of this feedback to identify trends or specific points supported by language learning theory.

In addition to feedback from teachers, feedback from students can be a useful tool for determining effectiveness and appropriacy of textbook design and content. For instance, at the end of each semester during the 2015 academic year, PMs conducted a pilot study (Young, 2016) on topic interest, which has been found to directly influence students' situational willingness to communicate (Aubrey, 2010; Kang, 2005; McIntyre et al. 1998). This pilot study only looked at topic interest and had 98 and 95 respondents for the spring and fall semesters respectively. For the 2016 academic year, the study was expanded to examine the additional topic dimensions of difficulty, perceived importance, and familiarity, as well as to collect responses from over 1,500 participants per semester. The results are currently under review and will inform the revision of future textbook editions.

Finally, ongoing development in the field of language teaching and learning provides many instruments by which to conduct analyses of and revisions to materials design. One example of this strand of evaluation was the readability analysis briefly mentioned above and discussed in detail in Young (2016). Another example is the analysis of gender representation in model dialogues and practice activities conducted by Livingston (2016). In both cases, appropriate revisions to the EDC textbook were made.

It is important to note that the three strands described here are not mutually exclusive, but rather inform each other. For instance, in creating the 6th Edition of *What do You Think?: Interactive Skills for Effective Discussions 2* (Lesley et al., 2015), instructor feedback and current knowledge about language teaching in combination led to the reformulation of the Changing Topic function, illustrated below.

Table 2. Revision to the Changing Topic function from fall 2014 to fall 2015 (Levels II-III)

Changing Topic Phrases (Fall 2014)	
<u>Checking if Everyone's Finished</u>	<u>Changing Topic</u>
Does anyone want to add something?	What shall we discuss first/next?
Does anyone have any other ideas?	Why don't we discuss {topic}?
Changing Topic Phrases (Fall 2015)	
<u>Choosing a Topic</u>	<u>Closing a Topic</u>
What shall we discuss first/next?	Is there anything to add?
Why don't we discuss {TOPIC}?	So, we agree/disagree about {TOPIC}.

The replacement of the phrases “Does anyone want to add something?” and “Does anyone have any other ideas?” with the phrase “Is there anything to add?” was made based on the feedback from several instructors that the former phrases were unnatural and too long for lower-level students to automatize quickly. Secondly, the reformulation of the function from “Checking if Everyone's Finished” and “Changing Topic” to “Choosing a Topic” and “Closing a Topic” is more in line with Celce-Murcia's (2007) model of communicative competence. Further, target language that performs the interactional function of closing a topic, which had been previously absent from the list of function phrases, was added. In this way, the curriculum was made more robust by addressing a new dimension of communicative competency to better achieve one of the

course's 26 cognitive objectives, appropriately changing the topic of discussion, as derived from Dörnyei and Thurrell (1992; 1994) and Kehe and Kehe (1994) and listed in Hurling's (2012) original introduction to EDC.

Such revisions are not restricted to target language alone, but may also apply to lesson content itself. One such example in the 7th Edition of *What do You Think?: Interactive Skills for Effective Discussions 2* (Lesley et al., 2016) was including the most currently available statistics from the World Economic Forum's report on gender quality when revising the homework reading for that textbook's lesson on gender in Japan. In the same edition, an entirely new lesson topic, Money, was added based on Seigel's (2014) comparison of textbook and self-selected discussion topics among university students in Japan.

CONCLUSION

Materials such as textbooks are an integral part of any language course. When programs and teachers have the luxury of creating their own course materials, it is important to do so in a principled manner that is in keeping with overall course aims and learning objectives. To that end, awareness of such aims and objectives must precede any materials creation. Once materials have been created, it is equally important to assess and revise such materials to the evolving local context. So too, then, it is important to be aware of how that context evolves. Feedback from teachers and students alike, as well as staying current with relevant research developments in the field of language learning and teaching, are important ways for materials developers, course creators, and teachers alike to continue meeting student needs.

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