

A Comparative Analysis of English Textbooks in China, Japan and Thailand: A Focus on Wh-interrogative Questions

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Abstract

This paper reports the simultaneous analysis of English textbooks from China, Japan, and Thailand. The motivation behind this work lies in the belief that these analyses shed important light on the classroom content of teaching English as a foreign or second language. This study makes a comparison of the frequency of the wh-interrogative questions taught in English textbooks in the above-mentioned countries. This paper focuses on the textbooks at the primary and secondary educational levels in Japan and the ones at primary educational level in China and Thailand. The aim is to analyze the corpora to identify some of the differences among the textbooks and to explore the findings which reflect English language teaching curriculum in Japan. Each textbook was first digitized and then analyzed in terms of the wh-interrogatives. The results reveal the following:

- (1) In China and Thailand, new wh-interrogative questions are introduced in a well-organized way from Book 1 to Book 3 in the primary school textbooks and they are also regularly recycled.
- (2) In China, four interrogatives (i.e. what, where, how, who) are introduced in the first grade at primary schools, while *why* is introduced in the second grade.
- (3) In Japan, the wh-interrogatives failed to appear in an organized way in standard EFL textbooks. The *what* and *how* interrogatives are taught in Book 1 (5th grade), while *how* is completely omitted in Book 2 (6th grade). In Book 2 the new interrogatives (i.e. where, when) are introduced, but *why* is never taught for three years.
- (4) The wh-interrogative *what* is the highest frequency in all of the textbooks in the three countries. However, the second most frequently taught wh-interrogative from Book 1 through Book 3 varies from country to country. Specifically, the second most frequently taught interrogatives are *where* in China, *who* in Thailand and *how* in Japan.

Keywords

Wh-interrogative questions, English textbooks

Introduction

In some Asian countries, such as China, Korea and Thailand, where they teach English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English teaching at primary schools was introduced much earlier than in Japan.

In China, it was announced that English teaching would be formally introduced at primary schools in 2001. As a result, nationwide English education has been implemented at primary schools since 2005. At present, in urban cities, such as Beijing and Shanghai, English language is taught as a formal subject from the first grade.

In Korea, English became a regular subject in 1997 and third to sixth graders have been learning English once or twice a week since 2000. In Thailand, English language as a required subject has started for all pupils at primary schools in 1996 and it is based upon the 'English Education Curriculum in 1996' that was announced by the Ministry of Education. Consistent English teaching has been implemented from primary schools to secondary schools (until the twelfth grade), and Thais utilize formal, authorized textbooks (Suzuki, 2009).

In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced that *Gaikokugo Katsudo* (foreign language activities) would be introduced, in principle once a week, for the fifth and sixth grades at all primary schools in Japan in 2011. Informally, English has already been introduced once a week at some primary schools. Some or many teachers are very concerned about English teaching at primary schools for various reasons: 1) the intended curriculum, 2) teaching staff training, 3) adequate textbooks, and 4) integration with junior high school textbooks.

Regarding connections with junior high school, based upon the practices of Narita primary school, Niizato (2009) points out the following:

“Unfortunately, even at the base school of ‘foreign language activity’ at primary school they cannot afford to take into consideration the English education at junior high school in terms of the time or the spiritual burden. Primary school teachers are very busy thinking over teaching their own English lessons. Therefore, they will not be aware of the way what they teach is connected with the teaching content at junior high schools. . . . On the other hand, I wonder if teachers at junior high schools know about what primary school teachers teach—the goals of teaching English and the activities for achieving the goals. Probably the teachers barely know about them.” [translated by the authors]

According to Okuno (2009), it was already indicated that there was a wide range of problems on introducing English education at primary schools during the Meiji Era in Japan. Some of these problems are the relationship between English and Japanese, the need for training the teaching staff, and the integration with junior high school textbooks. Similar problems remain to be unsolved at present.

In China, as mentioned earlier, the Ministry of Education announced that English language teaching would be formally introduced at primary schools in 2001, and it has been implemented at primary schools nationwide since 2005. However, the policy of English teaching at primary schools seems to have been implemented by the Ministry of Education without enough preparation for the relevant issues such as the teaching staff and educational funding (Hu, 2007). As a result, like the primary schools in Japan, Chinese have experienced problems such as the teacher shortage and the disparity in policy implementation among different schools. With an insufficient number of qualified teachers, English teaching was implemented by untrained teachers in many primary schools.

With regard to textbooks, MEXT proposed that teachers utilize the so-called *Eigo Noto* (English Notebook) textbooks at primary schools. Unfortunately, the use of these textbooks during English lessons is left to individual primary schools to decide. Therefore, “... some Boards of Education have opted not to have schools use those textbooks, while schools in other areas selectively plan to use them. Therefore, it will likely be difficult to iron out differences in teaching approaches among schools nationwide” (Torikai, 2009). The MEXT announcement resulted in confusion about how to teach future junior high school students.

In this paper, the textbooks at primary and secondary schools in Japan and the primary school

textbooks from Chinese and Thailand are analyzed. At present, although the *Eigo Noto* textbooks are called workbooks, they are utilized as formal textbooks at primary schools in Japan. However, MEXT announced that it is the teacher’s choice whether the *Eigo Noto* is put to use or not. English language is not taught as a formal school subject at primary schools, but as an activity called ‘foreign language activities’. Therefore, by analyzing the current authorized English teaching materials, it is hoped that the results and the discussion will contribute to the rationale behind future materials development in formal textbooks for English lessons at primary schools. Surely, the sentences including the wh-interrogative questions are essential in interaction between learners or between a teacher and learners during English lessons.

Therefore, in this paper, with an emphasis on communication-based teaching in Japan, the wh-interrogative questions taught at primary schools in Japan are examined. Then, Chinese, Thai, and Japanese textbooks are analyzed and discussed. More specifically, this paper aims to first discover similarities or differences among the three countries’ textbooks in terms of the frequency of each wh-interrogative question, and then to explore the frequency and appearance of each wh-interrogative question.

1 Method

Each textbook was first scanned and then items were analyzed in terms of the frequency of wh-interrogative questions. Also, this research distinguished between wh-interrogative questions and relative pronouns or adverbs, based upon the sentence structure and the meaning of the sentence with the target term or phrase. The *Eigo Noto* textbooks used in ‘foreign language activities’ at Japanese primary schools were analyzed, aiming at investigating the frequency of the wh-interrogative questions. Also, the same process was performed with the junior high school textbook called *New Horizon*. The reason why the particular textbook series was selected is that it is one of the most popular authorized textbooks at junior high schools in Japan. Likewise, Thai textbooks were analyzed with a focus on the same wh-interrogative questions as in the textbooks in Japan. The direct wh-interrogatives analyzed in this research are: what, where, how, who, when, why, and which. Below are the textbooks analyzed in this paper.

- (1) *Eigo Noto* textbooks at primary schools in Japan (G 5 and G 6)
- (2) *New Horizon* at junior high schools in Japan (JH 1)
- (3) Primary school textbooks in Thailand (Book 1 through Book 3)

(4) Primary school textbooks in China (Book 1 through Book 3)

2 Research & Discussion

2.1 Research Question (1)

Research question 1 ‘Are similarities or differences present among the textbooks in China, Japan, and Thailand, regarding the frequency of each wh-interrogative question?’ The data were analyzed and the results were discussed.

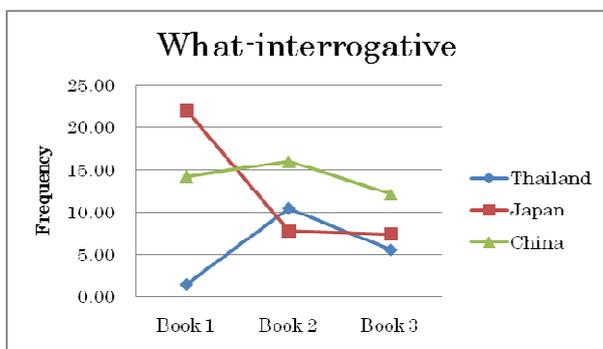
2.1.1 What-interrogative

As mentioned in the later section, the frequency of the what-interrogative is the highest among all the interrogatives in the textbooks in China, Japan and Thailand. This implies that the what-interrogative is very frequently spoken or written in communication. That is, the what-interrogative question is needed when people interact with each other and also the use of *what* facilitates smooth communication.

Figure 1, Frequency of What-questions, shows that in China the frequency of *what* tends to be higher and the appearance of the what-interrogative seems to be regular in Books 1 through 3.

Only in Thailand is the frequency of *what* quite low in Book 1. However, in Books 2 and 3, the frequency stands at almost the same as in Japanese textbooks.

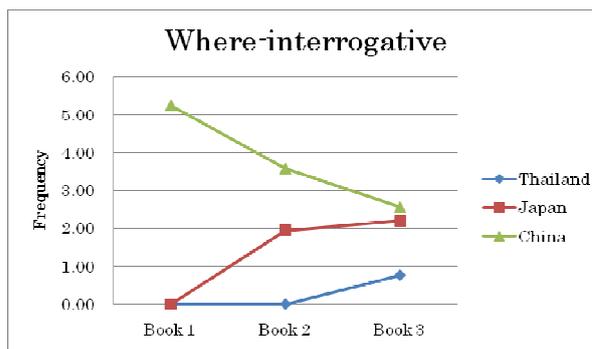
Figure 1: Frequency of What-questions



2.1.2 Where-interrogative

According to Figure 2, Frequency of Where-questions, the total frequency from Book 1 to Book 3 is not the same among these three countries. The frequency is the highest in China in each volume of the three countries. In Japan, the where-interrogative is never used in Book 1, but its frequency increases in Books 2 and 3. However, Figure 2 shows that in Thailand the where-interrogative is hardly used in communicative activities in English lessons from Book 1 through Book 3.

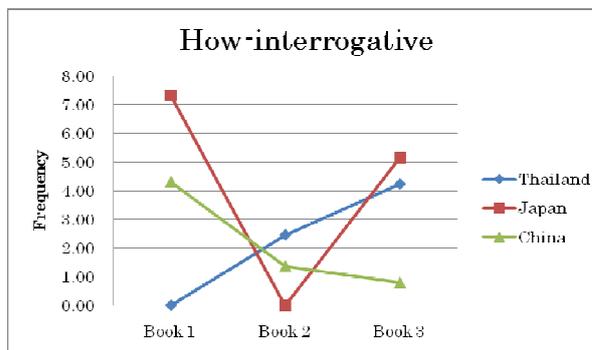
Figure 2: Frequency of Where-questions



2.1.3 How-interrogative

It depends on the textbook how frequently the how-interrogative is shown in all three countries. In Figure 3, Frequency of How-questions, for example, in Japanese textbooks *how* appears over seven times per one thousand words in Book 1, while in Book 2 it never appears. Then in Book 3 it is introduced five times per one thousand words. In China, the frequency of *how* gradually decreases from Book 1 through Book 3, while in Thailand the frequency increases from Book 2 to Book 3, even though there is no appearance of it in Book 1.

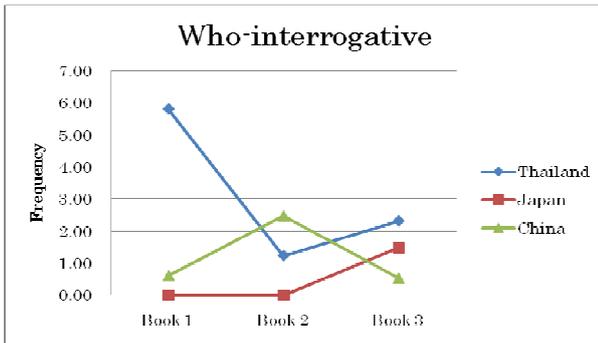
Figure 3: Frequency of How-questions



2.1.4 Who-interrogative

Judging from the graphs in Figure 4, Frequency of Who-questions, generally speaking, the frequency of the who-interrogative in Thailand is the highest among the three countries. The frequency of the who-interrogative in China and Thailand shows the contrary tendency. This means that in Book 2 in China the frequency of *who* is the highest, but the who-interrogative in the same volume in Thailand is the lowest. However, in Japanese primary school textbooks for 5th and 6th graders, the who-interrogative questions had not been taught.

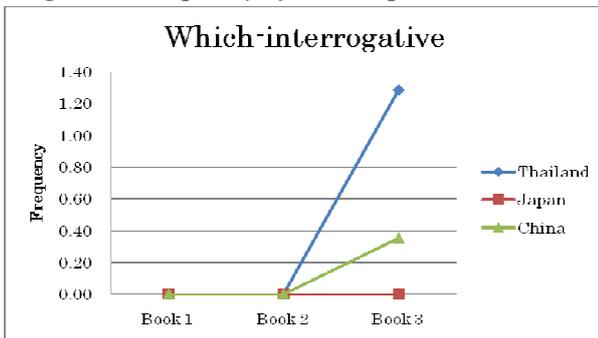
Figure 4: Frequency of Who-questions



2.1.5 Which-interrogative

Totally speaking, the frequency of the which-interrogative is quite low in all of these countries. However, the graphs look similar in Thailand and China even though the frequency of the which-interrogative in Book 3 is a little different (Figure 5). On the other hand, in Japan the which-interrogative is never taught from Book 1 through Book 3 in spite of the fact that the which-interrogative seems to be often used when asking about limited choices in real communication.

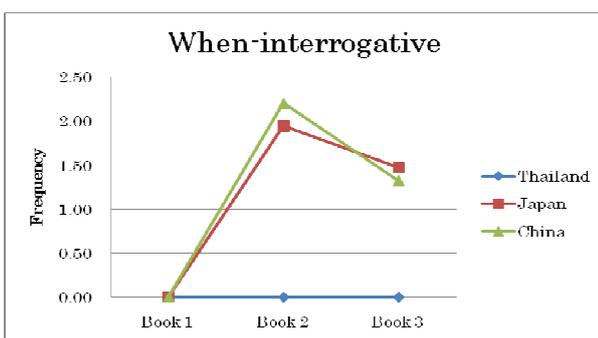
Figure 5: Frequency of Which-questions



2.1.6 When-interrogative

The when-interrogative graph looks quite similar for both Japan and China (Figure 6). However, the frequency of the when-interrogative in Thailand is much lower. This may imply that this when-interrogative is not regarded as an important structure at primary schools in Thailand.

Figure 6: Frequency of When-questions

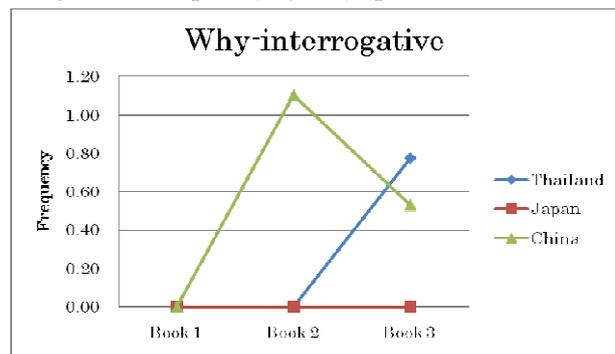


2.1.7 Why-interrogative

The why-interrogative, Figure 7, Frequency of Why-questions, indicates that the frequency of occurrence in these countries looks quite different. In China, in Book 2, the why-interrogative first appears and it is also treated in Book 3, as well. However, in Thailand the why-interrogative is not taught in either Book 1 or Book 2, and it first appears in Book 3. Looking at the frequency for Japan, there are no why-interrogatives in any of the three volumes.

The responses to *why* in communication is generally difficult, because when asked *why*, students have to describe the reason or opinion on their own, unlike the questions *what* or *who* often based on facts. In EFL countries such as China and Thailand, it is understandable that why questions lag what and who questions because those why answers are more demanding for beginning EFL learners to produce.

Figure 7: Frequency of Why-questions



2.2 Research Question (2)

Research question 2 asks, 'How frequently do the three countries' three textbooks introduce each wh-interrogative?' For Japan, the direct interrogatives *what* and *how* begin to be introduced in Book 1 (G 5). In Book 2 (G 6), *where* and *when* are introduced, and then, *who* is taught to students in Book 3 (JH 1). It looks as if the introduction of the wh-interrogatives in textbooks is well-organized in consideration of Japanese students' learning stage. Table 1, Frequency of Wh-interrogatives in Japan, however, shows that the data for wh-interrogatives is not well organized from G 5 to JH 1. For example, although the how-interrogative is treated in G 5, it is neglected in G 6 for the 6th graders. Also, the why- and which-interrogatives are never taught in three consecutive years from G 6 through JH 1.

Table 1 Frequency of the Wh-interrogatives in Japan (per 1000)

	G 5	G 6	JH 1
What	22.00	7.80	7.36
Where	0.00	1.95	2.21
How	7.33	0.00	5.15
Who	0.00	0.00	1.47
When	0.00	1.95	1.47
Why	0.00	0.00	0.00
Which	0.00	0.00	0.00
Token	409	513	1358

As stated in Uenishi *et al.* (2009), the introduction of the wh-interrogatives in Thai textbooks seems to be better-organized than in Japanese textbooks. Specifically, in Book 1 *what* and *who* are introduced for the first time, and in Book 2 *how* and *who* are taught to students at primary schools. Moreover, in Book 3, *where*, *why* and *which* are introduced as new wh-interrogative questions. This consistent teaching seems to be typical for EFL countries' textbooks. It seems that the teaching of the wh-interrogatives has been done well in Thailand in primary school textbooks.

Table 2 Frequency of the Wh-interrogatives in Thailand (per 1000)

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3
What	1.45	10.47	5.53
Where	0.00	0.00	0.77
How	0.00	2.46	4.25
Who	5.82	1.23	2.32
When	0.00	0.00	0.00
Why	0.00	0.00	0.77
Which	0.00	0.00	1.29
Token	2751	4869	7770

In China, the *what*-interrogative is taught most frequently followed by the *where*-interrogative from Book 1 through Book 3. Then, the *how*-interrogative is brought up as the third most frequent interrogative in Chinese textbooks. Generally speaking, the introduction of the wh-interrogatives is well-organized in China, compared to Japanese textbooks. More specifically, in English teaching at primary schools in China, in Book 1 *what*, *where*, *how* and *who* are introduced, and then in Book 2 *when* and *why*, and in Book 3 *which* starts to be taught as a new interrogative.

As for similarities among these three countries, the frequency of the *what*-interrogative is the highest in all of the textbooks. Furthermore, it can be said that the *which*-interrogative tends not to be taught so frequently from Book 1 through Book 3. In China and Thailand, the *which*-interrogative is

treated only in Book 3. The frequency of the *how*-interrogative is the third highest of all of the wh-interrogatives in China and Thailand.

Regarding differences among the three countries, the second most frequently used wh-interrogative is diverse among these countries. Specifically, the frequencies of the *how*- and *where*- and *who*-interrogatives are the second highest in Japan, China and Thailand, respectively.

Table 3 Frequency of the Wh-interrogatives in China (per 1000)

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3
What	14.21	16.00	12.12
Where	5.25	3.59	2.57
How	4.32	1.38	0.80
Who	0.62	2.48	0.53
When	0.00	2.21	1.33
Why	0.00	1.10	0.53
Which	0.00	0.00	0.35
Token	3237	3625	11299

3 Conclusion

In this paper, selected textbooks from China, Japan and Thailand were analyzed and discussed in terms of the frequency of the teaching of the direct wh-interrogative questions. As a result, the following findings were identified.

First, looking at the frequency of each wh-interrogative question, there are similarities and differences among the three countries. For example, the frequency of the *when*-interrogative from Book 1 through Book 3 in China is quite similar to that found in Japanese textbooks. On the other hand, the *where*-, *how*- and *who*-interrogatives were introduced in a quite different way in these countries.

Next, regarding the consistency of the wh-interrogatives in the textbooks in these three countries, the introduction of the wh-interrogatives in China and Thailand seems to be better-organized as a EFL country than in Japan. In China four wh-interrogatives are introduced at the first-grade level. In case of Chinese urban cities like Beijing, many children start to learn the sound and rhythm of English words at kindergarten by listening and mimicking. However, the introduction of the wh-interrogatives in Japan does not seem to be consistent or well-organized. Like in China and Thailand, the direct wh-interrogative questions in Japanese textbooks should be positively treated in a continuous way in order for students to improve communicative skills. Further research should be promoted to contribute to production of better textbooks and lead to the development of students'

communicative skills.

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