



What Textbooks Tell Us about Language Learning: A Comparative Reflection on Japanese and English Teaching Materials

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Abstract: This paper examines similarities and differences between Japanese and English language teaching materials, focusing on how they present language, learners, and classroom participation. Teaching materials are often treated as practical classroom tools, but they also show particular views of what language learning should be. Using examples from commonly used Japanese and English textbooks, this paper compares grammar, tasks, and cultural content. Japanese materials often place language in specific social situations and guide learners toward accurate and appropriate use. English materials often give learners more opportunities to express personal ideas, exchange information, and take part in open-ended communication. These tendencies are not discussed as competing models. Instead, the paper considers what each approach can contribute to language teaching. The paper suggests that combining these strengths may help teachers and material developers design learning materials that support accuracy, meaningful communication, and intercultural reflection in multilingual higher education classrooms.



1. INTRODUCTION

This paper grew out of a presentation given at Lakeland University Japan in June 2026. The presentation began with a practical question that many language teachers recognize: when we compare Japanese and English language teaching materials, what can we learn about the way language learning is imagined? Textbooks are

often used as classroom tools, but they also carry assumptions about what counts as good language use, how learners should participate, and what kind of language user education should develop.

The comparison is useful because Japanese and English materials often make different choices. Japanese language materials tend to place grammar and vocabulary within concrete social situations,

such as making requests, speaking politely, or choosing expressions according to the relationship between speakers. English language materials, particularly communicative textbooks, often give learners more space to express personal ideas, exchange information, and develop independence in language use. These are tendencies rather than fixed categories, but they reveal different pedagogical priorities.

The purpose of this paper is not to rank one tradition above the other. Instead, it reflects on what each approach makes possible in the classroom. The paper argues that language teaching materials can become more useful when they combine attention to context and accuracy with opportunities for communication, learner choice, and intercultural reflection.

2. TEACHING MATERIALS AS PEDAGOGICAL DESIGN

Teaching materials do more than present language content. They organize classroom participation. A grammar explanation, a model dialogue, a substitution drill, a pair-work task, or a cultural comparison activity each suggests a particular view of how language should be learned. In this sense, teaching materials may be understood as a form of pedagogical design. They shape not only what learners study, but also how learners are invited to behave with language.

Research on language teaching materials has emphasized that materials reflect assumptions about learning, classroom interaction, and the roles of teachers and learners (Tomlinson, 2011). Similarly, communicative language teaching has encouraged attention to learners' ability to use language for meaning-making, not only to master grammatical forms (Canale & Swain, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). At the same time, language learning also involves socialization into appropriate forms of participation. Learners need to understand not only what a sentence means grammatically, but also when and how it may be used in relation to others.

For this reason, a comparison of Japanese and English teaching materials can make visible the

different ways textbooks imagine the learner. In the materials considered here, the Japanese side often imagines learners as people who need to participate appropriately in social situations. The English side often imagines learners as people who need to express their own ideas and interact with others. These two images can be brought together rather than treated as separate goals.

3. METHOD AND MATERIALS

This paper uses a qualitative and interpretive comparison of commonly used Japanese and English language teaching materials. The Japanese materials include beginner-level textbooks such as *Minna no Nihongo*, *Genki*, and *Marugoto*. These materials commonly feature situational dialogues, grammar patterns, usage notes, and attention to social appropriateness. The English materials include communicative textbooks such as *Interchange*, *Headway*, and *Touchstone*, although the discussion below uses selected examples rather than treating all textbooks equally. These materials often feature topic-based units, pair or group work, personalized production, and cultural comparison.

The analysis focuses on three areas: grammar, tasks, and cultural content. These areas were selected because they are central to textbook design and because they show how learners are expected to engage with language. The six titles examined here were selected as representative examples of commonly used beginner-level language teaching materials in Japanese higher education contexts. The aim is not to provide a statistical survey of all textbooks. Rather, the paper identifies recurring patterns and uses selected examples to support a reflective discussion of pedagogical design. Because this article is submitted as a critical reflection, the examples are used not as data for quantitative comparison but as points of departure for examining broader assumptions about language learning and textbook design.

4. COMPARATIVE REFLECTIONS

4.1. Grammar

One clear difference concerns the relationship between grammar and use. In Japanese materials,

grammar is often presented within defined social situations. For example, a structure such as *-te kudasai* (てください) form may be introduced through a request, followed by substitution practice. Learners may be asked to transform a verb form accurately or to insert a suitable word into a model sentence. The value of this design is that it gives learners a stable path from model form to correct use.

In English materials, grammar is often connected to personal meaning. A textbook may ask learners to complete a sentence such as “I’d like to go ____ this weekend,” and then compare answers with a partner. Another activity may ask learners to discuss what makes a good neighborhood or to state and defend an opinion. In this design, grammar functions not only as a form to be mastered, but also as a resource for expressing ideas.

This contrast can be summarized as follows: Japanese materials often ask, “Can you use the correct expression in this situation?” English materials often ask, “Can you use language to express your own idea?” Both questions matter. Accuracy without communication may become mechanical, while communication without sufficient accuracy may become unclear. A strong design needs to connect accurate form with meaningful use.

4.2. Tasks and Classroom Participation

A second difference appears in classroom tasks. Japanese materials often begin with controlled practice: model sentences, substitution drills, and short role-plays in defined situations. Such tasks are especially useful for beginners because they reduce the burden of producing language independently and help learners build confidence. They also connect language use with social situations, which is important in Japanese, where relationships and levels of politeness often shape expression.

English materials, by contrast, often move learners toward open-ended production. Pair work, small-group discussion, surveys, interviews, and project-style tasks ask students to use language as themselves. The answer is not always

predetermined. Learners are expected to express personal experience, ask follow-up questions, and negotiate meaning with classmates.

These task types can be seen as a continuum: controlled practice, meaningful practice, and open-ended production. The issue is not whether one side of the continuum is better. Learners need movement across the continuum. Controlled practice supports accuracy; meaningful practice connects form to use; open-ended production gives learners room to develop fluency and personal voice.

4.3. Culture and the Image of the Learner

Culture is also represented differently. In Japanese materials, culture often appears as situational appropriateness. Learners are asked to consider who is speaking to whom, where the interaction takes place, and what level of politeness is suitable. In this sense, culture is not presented only as information about Japanese society. It is built into the way language is chosen and used.

In English materials, culture more often appears through comparison, identity, and opinion. Learners may compare customs across countries, discuss daily life, or describe their own preferences and experiences. These activities invite learners to see themselves as participants in intercultural exchange. It should be noted, however, that this contrast is one of emphasis rather than presence: Marugoto, in particular, does include cross-cultural comparison tasks, though such activities are more consistently foregrounded in English communicative textbooks.

Together, these patterns suggest different images of the learner. Japanese materials often construct the learner as an appropriate participant who can choose forms according to relationship and context. English materials often construct the learner as an autonomous communicator who can express ideas and negotiate meaning. This paper proposes a third image: the flexible multilingual learner. Such a learner can use language accurately, appropriately, personally, and reflectively.

5. TOWARD AN INTEGRATED DESIGN

The comparison suggests that the two traditions

can be integrated in practical ways. A sample unit on making requests illustrates this point. The unit could begin with context: learners first examine a social situation, such as a new employee asking a supervisor for help, and decide which expression sounds appropriate. Next, learners practice accurate form, such as *-te kudasai* (てください), through controlled grammar work. Then, learners move into production by making real requests to classmates and responding naturally. Finally, learners reflect on how requests are made in their own languages and cultures. This sequence is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Sample Unit: Making Requests

Stage	Activity
Context	Learners examine a social situation, such as a new employee asking a supervisor for help, and decide which expression sounds appropriate.
Form	Learners practice accurate form, such as <i>-te kudasai</i> (てください), through controlled grammar work.
Production	Learners make real requests to classmates and respond naturally.
Reflection	Learners reflect on how requests are made in their own languages and cultures.

This sequence can be described as context, form, production, and reflection. The first two steps draw on the strengths of Japanese materials: social appropriateness and controlled accuracy. The last two steps draw on the strengths of communicative English materials: meaningful interaction and intercultural awareness. The sequence does not remove the value of accuracy. Rather, it places

accuracy inside a larger cycle of communication and reflection.

Such an integrated design may be especially useful in multilingual and intercultural higher education settings. Students need to use language accurately, but they also need to choose expressions according to relationships, explain their own meanings, and reflect on communication across cultures. Materials that support only one of these goals may leave learners with an incomplete view of language use.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS AND MATERIAL DEVELOPERS

For teachers, the main implication is sequencing. A lesson does not need to remain at the level of grammar explanation or drill. Teachers can begin with context, move to form, extend practice into communication, and end with reflection. This does not require abandoning textbook materials. It requires using them as starting points and adding tasks that help learners move from controlled practice to personal communication.

For material developers, the implication is balance. Materials can include clear models and accurate practice while also making space for student choice and intercultural comparison. For example, a model dialogue can be followed by a short controlled drill, then by a personalized speaking task, and finally by a reflection question about similar expressions in students' first languages or other languages they know.

The broader implication is that language education should not force a choice between accuracy and communication. Learners need both. They also need awareness of context, relationship, identity, and culture. A more flexible design can help learners become not only correct speakers or active communicators, but language users who can move between different situations and expectations.

7. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This paper is reflective and interpretive, and its examples are illustrative rather than exhaustive. It does not claim that all Japanese materials share one

design or that all English materials share another. Actual classroom use may also differ from textbook design. Teachers adapt materials, students respond in different ways, and local educational contexts shape how textbooks are used.

Future work should therefore include classroom observation, teacher interviews, and learner responses. It would also be useful to compare materials across proficiency levels and to examine digital and AI-assisted learning materials. These directions would allow the discussion to move from textbook comparison to the study of classroom interaction and learner experience.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has compared Japanese and English language teaching materials as examples of pedagogical design. Japanese materials often highlight context, accuracy, and social relationships. English materials often highlight communication, learner choice, and personal voice. Rather than treating these as competing models, the paper has argued for bringing them together.

A stronger material design does not choose between accuracy and communication. It helps learners move between social appropriateness, personal expression, and intercultural understanding. By looking carefully at what each teaching tradition makes possible, teachers and material developers can design richer and more responsive materials for multilingual and intercultural classrooms. Ultimately, this integrated approach supports the development of the flexible multilingual learner: one who can use language accurately, appropriately, personally, and reflectively across diverse contexts.

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