

English Textbook Analysis in China, Japan, Malaysia 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, Malaysia 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 (Book 1 to Book 5) at primary educational level in China, Malaysia 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 the total number of words and interrogatives were counted in Word 2010. Then the number of times that each interrogative appeared every 1000 words in each textbook was calculated. As a result, it is revealed that in China and Thailand, new wh-interrogative questions are introduced in a well-organized way from Book 1 to Book 5 in the primary school textbooks and they are also regularly recycled. Also, regarding the frequency of wh-interrogative questions, the wh-interrogative *what* is the highest frequency in almost all the textbooks in the four countries. Then the second most frequently taught wh-interrogative from Book 1 through Book 5 is *how* in Malaysia, Japan and Thailand, while in China *where* shows the second highest frequency.

Keywords: English textbook, wh-interrogative questions

1 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 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. Systematic English teaching has been implemented from primary schools to secondary schools (until the twelfth grade), and Thais utilize formal, authorized textbooks (Suzuki, 2009).

In Malaysia English is considered to be the second language following Malay as an official language and English language is taught from the first grade at primary school through secondary and tertiary education. In the Pre-school National Curriculum introduced in 2003, the target language is taught twice a week as one of the compulsory subjects at kindergartens in order to develop four basic skills before entering primary school. When it comes to English language teaching, the level of language teaching in Malaysia is much higher than that of Japan's English education. One of the reasons is that the content of English teaching at primary

schools in Malaysia corresponds to Japan's junior high school level. Also, English teaching to lower graders at primary school is orally based. But they tend to put an emphasis on grammatical items, reading comprehension of long passages and English composition at higher grades, from the fourth grade and above (Teshima, 2005).

In Japan, foreign language activities (*Gaikokugo Katsudo*) were introduced, in principle, once a week, for the fifth and sixth grades at all primary schools in 2011. However, English had already been informally taught once a week at some primary schools. After the introduction of English teaching, some or many teachers are very concerned about English teaching at primary schools for various reasons: 1) curriculum, 2) teaching staff training, 3) adequate textbooks, and 4) integration with other junior high school textbooks.

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 (1868-1912). Some of those former problems were 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 unresolved 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 preparing the teaching staff and educational funding (Hu, 2007). As a result, like the primary schools in Japan, the Chinese have experienced problems such as a 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 English Notebook (*i.e. Eigo Noto*) at primary schools. Unfortunately, the use of these textbooks during English lessons is left to individual primary schools to implement. 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 among learners or between a teacher and learners during English lessons.

Therefore, in this paper, with an emphasis on communication-based teaching techniques in Japan, the wh-interrogative questions taught at primary and secondary schools in Japan are examined. Then, Chinese, Malaysian, Thai, and Japanese textbooks are analyzed and discussed. More specifically, this paper aims to first find how each wh-interrogative question is treated in the above countries in terms of the frequency, and then to explore similarities or differences among the four countries' textbooks regarding the frequency and appearance of each wh-interrogative question.

2 Method

Each textbook was first scanned and the total number of words and interrogatives were counted in Word 2010. Next, the number of times that each interrogative appeared every 1000 words in each textbook was calculated. Then, wh-interrogative questions were analyzed in terms of frequency. Also, this research makes a distinction 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* textbooks¹ 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

¹ The *Eigo Noto* textbooks are produced with a lot of pictures and few English words and sentences. This is based upon MEXT's belief that fifth and sixth graders would take more interest in the target language and familiarize themselves more with English at primary school with this format. Therefore, based upon the teaching manuals of the textbooks, the English words and sentences were digitized and analyzed.

one of the most popular authorized textbooks at junior high schools in Japan. Likewise, Chinese, Malaysian, and 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 1* and 2 at primary schools in Japan (Books 1 and 2)
- (2) *New Horizon English Course 1, 2, and 3* at junior high schools in Japan (Books 3, 4 and 5)
- (3) Primary school textbooks in Thailand (Book 1 through Book 5)
- (4) Primary school textbooks in China (Book 1 through Book 5)
- (5) Primary school textbooks in Malaysia (Book 1 through Book 5)

Regarding the learning stages of each textbook, in Japan *Eigo Noto 1* and 2 (Books 1 and 2) are used by 5th and 6th graders at primary schools, and *New Horizon English Course 1, 2 and 3* (Books 3, 4 and 5) are used by 1st-year, 2nd-year and 3rd-year students at junior high schools, respectively. On the other hand, in the three other countries, Books 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 are used by 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th graders at primary schools, respectively.

3 Research & Discussion

3.1 Research Question (1)

Research question 1 asks ‘How is each wh-interrogative question treated among the textbooks in China, Japan, Malaysia and Thailand in terms of the frequency?’ The data were analyzed and the results were discussed.

3.1.1 What-interrogative

The frequency of the what-interrogative is the highest among all the interrogatives in the textbooks in China, Japan, Malaysia 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.

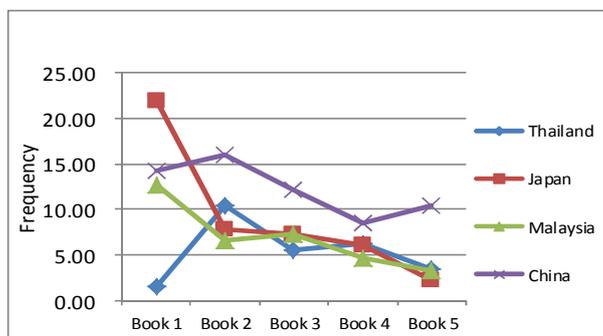


Figure 1: Frequency of What-questions

Figure 1 shows that in China the frequency of what-questions tends to be higher and the what-interrogative seems to appear regularly in Books 1 through 5. Only in Thailand is the frequency of *what* quite low in Book 1. However, the frequency from Book 2 through Book 5 stands at almost the same in Japanese, Malaysian and Thai textbooks.

3.1.2 Where-interrogative

According to Figure 2, in Book 1 the graphs of the where-interrogative show both extremes of either frequent use or no use. In other words, in China and Malaysia the where-interrogative is frequently taught, while in Japan and Thailand the interrogative is never used in the first volume. However, the frequency of *where* in Japan and Malaysia are similar from Book 2 to Book 5.

On the other hand, in Thailand the where-interrogative is hardly used in communicative activities in English lessons from Book 1 through Book 2 and Figure 2 shows the graph of Thailand is unusual among the five textbooks. Also, the frequency of *where* is the highest in China in all the volumes of the four counties, except for Book 1. It seems desirable that the where-interrogative is shown to students, like in China and Malaysia, because lower graders should often learn English using communicative texts, while higher graders

gradually read longer passages.

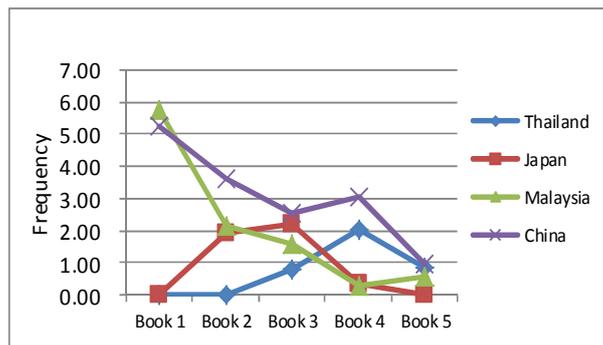


Figure 2: Frequency of Where-questions

3.1.3 How-interrogative

It depends on the textbook how frequently the how-interrogative is shown in all four countries. In Figure 3, in Japanese textbooks, *how* appears over seven times per one thousand words in Book 1, while in Book 2 it never appears. Then *how* is introduced five times, three times and once per one thousand words in Books 3, 4 and 5, respectively. In China, the frequency of *how* gradually decreases from Book 1 through Book 3 and it increases in Books 4 and 5, while in Thailand the frequency increases from Book 2 to Book 4, even though there is no appearance of it in Book 1. In Malaysia the frequency gradually decreases from Book 1 through Book 5.

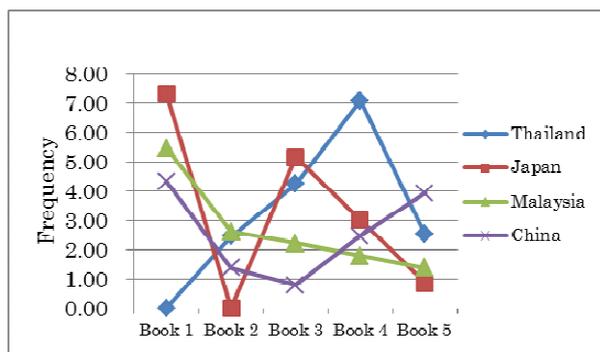


Figure 3: Frequency of How-questions

3.1.4 Who-interrogative

Judging from the graphs in Figure 4, generally speaking, the frequency of the who-interrogative in Thailand is the highest among the four countries. The frequency of the who-interrogative in China and Malaysia tends to be lower from Book 2 through Book 5. This implies that the who-interrogative is taught well enough so students have learned it. On the other hand, in Japanese primary school textbooks for fifth and sixth graders, the who-interrogative questions had not been taught. It appears for the first time in Book 3; then the frequency gradually becomes lower.

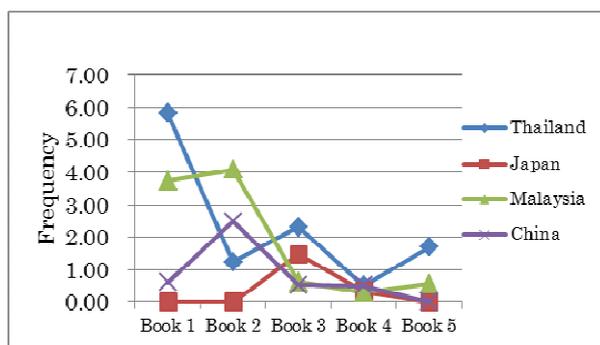


Figure 4: Frequency of Who-questions

3.1.5 Which-interrogative

The frequency of the which-interrogative is quite low in all of these countries. Except for Malaysia, the which-interrogative is never taught in Books 1 and 2 in the other countries (Figure 5). In Japan the which-interrogative is taught only in Book 4 of all the volumes, in spite of the fact that the which-interrogative seems to be often used when asking about limited choices in real communication.

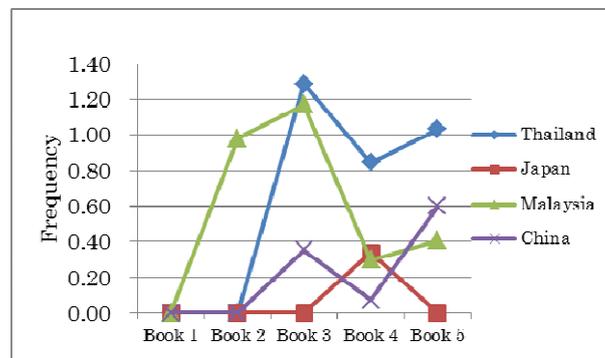


Figure 5: Frequency of Which-questions

3.1.6 When-interrogative

The when-interrogative graph looks quite similar for both Japan and China (Figure 6). In particular, in Thailand the frequency of the when-interrogative is much lower in all the five volumes. This may imply that this when-interrogative is not regarded as an important structure at primary schools in Thailand. Unlike the where-interrogative, the total frequency of the when-interrogative is lower, and the frequency of *when* in Book 4 is quite low in all of these countries.

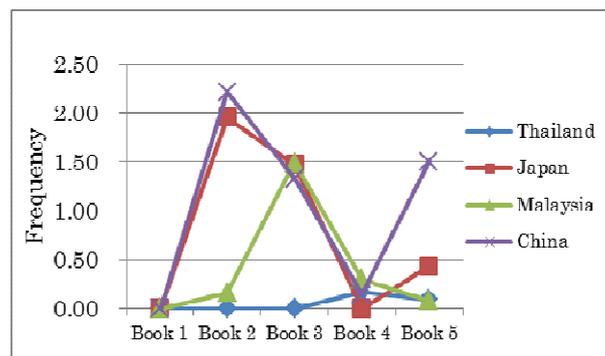


Figure 6: Frequency of When-questions

3.1.7 Why-interrogative

Figure 7 indicates that the frequency of *why* occurrences in these countries looks quite different. In China, the *why*-interrogative first appears in Book 2 and it is constantly reviewed from Book 3 to Book 5. However, in Thailand the *why*-interrogative is not taught in either Book 1 or Book 2, but it is treated from Book 3 to Book 5. Looking at the frequency for Japan, there are no *why*-interrogatives in any of the first three volumes, but it is taught gradually in Books 4 and 5.

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 fact-based questions *what*-, *who*- and *which*-interrogatives. In EFL countries such as China and Thailand, it is understandable that *why*-questions lag behind *what*- and *who*-questions because the answers to *why*-questions are more demanding for beginning EFL learners to produce.

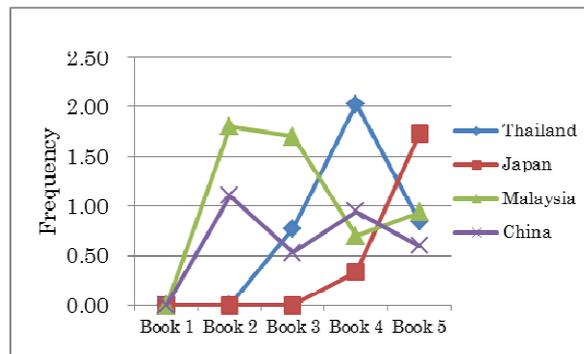


Figure 7: Frequency of Why-questions

3.1.8 Token of Wh-interrogatives

As Figure 8 shows, it is evident that the number of wh-interrogatives in English textbooks from Book 1 to Book 5 in Japan is much smaller than that of the wh-interrogatives in three other countries' textbooks. Although the frequency depends on the volume of each textbook whether the number of the wh-interrogatives is larger or not, the total number of the wh-interrogatives in each textbook in Japan is too small compared to that of other countries' textbooks.

Furthermore, when you think that the textbooks in China, Malaysia and Thailand are primary school levels, we cannot help but say that English textbooks and English teaching contents in Japan remain far behind the other countries in terms of communication-oriented English teaching.

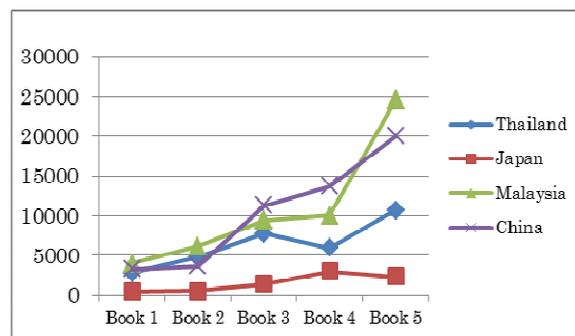


Figure 8: Token of Wh-interrogatives

3.2 Research Question (2)

Research question 2 asks, 'Are similarities or differences present among the four countries' textbooks regarding the frequency and appearance of each wh-interrogative question?' For Japan, the direct interrogatives *what* and *how* begin to be introduced in Book 1. In Book 2, *where* and *when* are introduced, and then, *who* is taught to students in Book 3. 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 the Wh-interrogatives in Japan (per 1000 words)

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5
What	22.00	7.80	7.36	6.06	2.16
Where	0.00	1.95	2.21	0.34	0.00
How	7.33	0.00	5.15	3.03	0.86
Who	0.00	0.00	1.47	0.34	0.00
When	0.00	1.95	1.47	0.00	0.43
Why	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.34	1.73
Which	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.34	0.00

Table 1, however, shows that the data for wh-interrogatives is not well ordered from Book 1 to Book 5. For example, although the how-interrogative is taught in Book 1, it is neglected in Book 2 for the sixth graders. Also, the why- and which-interrogatives are never taught in three consecutive years from Book 1 through Book 3, especially the which-interrogative is treated only in Book 4 of all the textbooks.

As stated in Uenishi (2010), in Malaysia, *what*, *where*, *how* and *who* are treated at the same time in Book 1 at primary schools in Malaysia. In Book 2 *when*, *why* and *which* are taught to second graders in Malaysia, and after that, all these wh-interrogatives are treated in all volumes in this country. In a sense, the introduction of all these wh-interrogatives to the first and second grades at primary schools can be viable in Malaysia as an ESL country. In EFL countries, however, it might be doubtful if they teach all the wh-interrogatives at the first and second grades at primary schools.

Table 2 : Frequency of the Wh-interrogatives in Malaysia (per 1000 words)

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5
What	12.71	6.54	7.33	4.70	3.30
Where	5.73	2.13	1.59	0.30	0.57
How	5.48	2.62	2.23	1.80	1.39
Who	3.74	4.09	0.64	0.30	0.57
When	0.00	0.16	1.49	0.30	0.08
Why	0.00	1.80	1.70	0.70	0.94
Which	0.00	0.98	1.17	0.30	0.41

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, 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. Then the when-interrogative is introduced in Book 4 despite the fact that the numerical value is small. This consistent teaching seems to be typical for EFL countries' textbooks. Even though the frequency of the when-interrogative is much lower in all volumes, the teaching of the wh-interrogatives is considered to have been done well in primary school textbooks in Thailand.

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

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5
What	1.45	10.47	5.53	6.24	3.47
Where	0.00	0.00	0.77	2.02	0.84
How	0.00	2.46	4.25	7.09	2.53
Who	5.82	1.23	2.32	0.51	1.69
When	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.17	0.09
Why	0.00	0.00	0.77	2.02	0.84
Which	0.00	0.00	1.29	0.84	1.03

In China, the what-interrogative is taught most frequently, then followed by the where-interrogative from Book 1 through Book 5. 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 better 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.

Table 4: Frequency of the Wh-interrogatives in China (per 1000 words)

	Book 1	Book 2	Book 3	Book 4	Book 5
What	14.21	16.00	12.12	8.45	10.49
Where	5.25	3.59	2.57	3.06	0.95
How	4.32	1.38	0.80	2.48	3.95
Who	0.62	2.48	0.53	0.51	0.00
When	0.00	2.21	1.33	0.15	1.50
Why	0.00	1.10	0.53	0.95	0.60
Which	0.00	0.00	0.35	0.07	0.60

As for similarities among these four 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 5. The frequency of the how-interrogative is the second highest of all of the wh-interrogatives in Japan, Malaysia and Thailand, and in China it is frequently taught even if the frequency of how-interrogative is the third highest.

Regarding differences among the four countries, the frequency of each interrogative varies from country to

country. For instance, in Thailand the when-interrogative is treated in Books 4 and 5, but it shows quite a small numerical value. Although it depends on the textbook of each country, four countries' textbooks are diverse in the token of wh-interrogatives. Especially, in China the number of the interrogatives is much larger, compared to the three other countries.

4 Conclusion

In this paper, selected textbooks from China, Japan, Malaysia 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 four countries. For example, the frequency of the when-interrogative from Book 1 through Book 5 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 order in these countries.

Next, regarding the consistency of the wh-interrogatives in the textbooks in these four 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 the case of Chinese urban cities like Beijing, many children seem to 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 taught in a continuous way in order for students to improve their communicative skills.

Third, the token of the wh-interrogatives in English textbooks in Japan should be reviewed as well. To promote communication-oriented English teaching in Japan, the wh-interrogatives should be more frequently taught in the textbooks. For that purpose, the number of pages of the textbooks should be larger and more wh-interrogatives should be treated in Japanese textbooks, like those in Thai or Malaysian ones.

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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