

What should we talk about? The authenticity of textbook topics

Aki Siegel

Topics presented in textbooks and covered in language classrooms are crucial parts of language teaching, as they facilitate student engagement, willingness to communicate, and ultimately, learning. However, whilst researchers and practitioners frequently discuss the authenticity of the language in textbooks, the authenticity and usefulness of textbook topics are rarely discussed or evaluated. To investigate their authenticity, topics from ELT textbooks and naturally occurring conversations were collected, categorized, and compared. The conversations occurred in English between Japanese and non-Japanese students from ten different countries at a university dormitory in Japan. When the textbooks and conversations were compared, large discrepancies between the treatment of some topics became evident, including students' school lives. Pedagogic implications stemming from this review include incorporating topics that are realistic and practical for L2 English users into language classrooms to better prepare students for the 'world out there'.

Introduction

Selecting conversation topics is always a challenge when people meet for the first time, not to mention when talking with someone from a different country. My students tell me, 'I want to be a better speaker in English', but when talking with foreign students, the Japanese students I teach tend to shy away. They hesitate to initiate topics and rely on their more fluent interlocutor to suggest the topics. However, English classes in Japan from the first year of junior high school (ages 12 to 13) onwards teach the question forms that enable them to initiate topics. Yet the lack of conversation initiation by Japanese students prompted me to wonder: are we exposing students to the right topics that allow them to converse with people from other cultures in English? Can students converse on a variety of topics? Are students in an EFL context prepared for the increasing amount of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) interactions worldwide? What topics do students actually talk about with their friends who are from other cultures?

These are all important questions for English teachers when preparing students from predominantly monocultural, monolingual backgrounds to interact with students from other cultures in a globalized world. Conversation textbooks introduce various topics that are seemingly common topics for conversation. Nevertheless, little is known from an

empirical point of view, about the actual casual conversation topics that English language students engage in during their everyday interactions with other foreign students. Therefore, by investigating topics EFL students actually talk about outside the classroom and comparing them with popular ELT textbook topics, this paper explores whether discrepancies exist between the two. Moreover, based on the findings, it aims to suggest additions to textbook topics EFL students may need to prepare for prior to their encounters with other English-speaking students.

Importance of conversation topics

‘Topic’ is used hereafter to refer to the main theme or subject of conversations and language textbook chapters. In the conversations, this refers to the focus of the discussion; in the textbooks, this refers to the discussion prompts or themes of the content through which grammar or vocabulary items are introduced.

Topic is a key component of language learning and teaching. It impacts the range of vocabulary in texts to which learners will be exposed (Nation and Waring 1997). Socially relevant topics for students in language classrooms can also empower learners and facilitate the learning process (Cummins 1994). More recently, the importance of topics has been articulated strongly by the supporters of the concept of ‘willingness to communicate’ (WTC).

WTC refers to the ‘probability of engaging in communication when free to choose to do so’ (MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels 1998: 546) and has gained more attention as emphasis on communication in the field of L2 learning and instruction has increased. MacIntyre *et al.* (ibid.) argue that expertise and familiarity with the topic will boost the learners’ linguistic self-confidence. In contrast, a lack of these aspects will hinder their WTC. For instance, Kang (2005) found topic familiarity provided the students with more security in oral production which led to students’ WTC. Therefore, topic selection in language classrooms is vital when prompting active interaction between the students, and this selection is often heavily influenced by textbooks.

What kinds of topics prepare students?

Previous investigations on textbook topics support the significance of topics in relation to student interests and WTC. However, there are conflicting views on the types of topics (for example focusing on local, international, or native-speaker (NS) culture) that should be prioritized if teachers wish to prepare students for contact with other speakers of English outside the classroom.

For instance, McKay (2003) emphasizes the importance of topics focusing on the local culture. From the view of ELF, she argues that each country has to take ownership of the language and select appropriate pedagogy that meets its learners’ needs, including textbook topics. She further argues that textbooks should provide topics on local culture in order for learners to communicate to others about their own culture in English.

However, McKay’s (ibid.) own data show the teachers’ beliefs about the importance of ‘international’ topics. When conducting a questionnaire

with teachers in Chile, she found a majority of them believed that textbook topics should deal with various cultures around the world rather than local Chilean or US/UK cultures. Her study highlighted the conflicting views on ‘appropriate’ textbook topics between researchers and teachers.

In contrast to these Chilean teachers’ perspectives, [Wolf \(2013\)](#) found that his Japanese EFL students preferred local topics over international topics. His data showed over 80 per cent of the topics chosen by the students were domestic (Japanese) topics and only 15 out of 101 topics were international topics. Furthermore, [Wolf \(ibid.: 60\)](#) suggests that ‘it is more sensible to have learners select their own topics for discussion’ to facilitate WTC. In a predominantly monocultural classroom such as Japan, this may be true. However, in the real language use context outside the classroom which students are preparing for, how practical are these textbook or self-selected topics?

Textbooks and their authenticity

Little research, however, has investigated the authenticity of textbook topics and their connection to the world outside the language classroom.

Textbook ‘authenticity’ in respect of its language has been discussed and debated extensively in the ELT literature. For instance, several textbook investigations have addressed the gap between textbook dialogues and actual conversations by NSs and have argued the need for exposing learners to ‘natural language’ ([Wong 2002](#); [Gilmore 2004](#)). In contrast, [Widdowson \(1990: 44\)](#) has argued that authenticity of language in the classroom is ‘an illusion’, since the language intended for NSs cannot be authentic for the language-learner audience in the classroom setting.

However, this paper does not intend to join the debate on the appropriateness of authentic language in the textbooks. Rather, I question the definition of ‘authenticity’ and problematize the lack of teaching materials based on L2 user norms. For instance, [Cook \(2008\)](#) emphasizes the importance of L2 user role models, yet language textbooks seldom present L2 users successfully engaging with each other or NSs.

Furthermore, the discussion on textbook authenticity has focused on language *per se* and has overlooked the authenticity of topics, what people actually talk about in their daily lives. In particular, little is known about which topics L2 users typically converse about in the L2.

This article therefore aims to (1) investigate which topics arise in English conversations between Japanese and non-Japanese speakers of English outside the classroom, and (2) bridge the gap, if any, with the textbook topics used in the Japanese EFL classroom. Moreover, in pursuing the enquiry, ‘authenticity’ is used below to refer to L2 users’ language use and experiences outside the language classroom.

Methods and results

This investigation was completed in three stages. First, textbook topics were collected from a selection of commercially published books. Then, conversations between Japanese and non-Japanese speakers of

| Textbook type | Title |
|-----------------------|---|
| Integrated | <i>English Firsthand New Gold 1</i> <i>Face2face Starter</i> <i>Fifty-fifty Book 1</i> <i>Interactions 2 Listening and Speaking 1</i> <i>Let's Talk 1</i> |
| Discussion and debate | <i>Opposing Views Welcome</i> <i>Taking Sides</i> |
| Everyday conversation | <i>Communication Strategies 1</i> <i>Talk a Lot</i> <i>Topic Talk</i> <i>Topic Talk Issues</i> |

TABLE 1
Textbooks

English were collected. Finally, these two collections were categorized and compared. The following sections will describe the details of this process and the initial results.

Textbook topics

Eleven textbooks available on the Japanese EFL textbook market were selected. All textbooks in the collection had an oral production focus. However, an effort was made to balance the variety of aims and levels of difficulty. Five textbooks were integrated skills textbooks with a conversation focus, three concentrated on discussion and debate, and the other three emphasized everyday English conversations (Table 1 and Appendix 1).

In total, 162 topics were identified. Six common textbook themes, based on Wolf (op.cit.), were adapted to initially categorize the topics: 'animals', 'food and health', 'language', 'money', 'relationships', and 'social issues'. For the topics that did not fit into these initial categories, seven new categories that emerged from the collection of textbooks were created so that all topics would be in some kind of category. This was done by grouping similar topics and then identifying an overarching theme for each group. These new categories were: 'academic life', 'culture', 'entertainment', 'extra-curricular activities', 'living situation', 'places and travel', and 'self'. The categories and sample topics are shown in Table 2.

| Categories | Example topics |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Animal | Zoo, Animals |
| Food/health | Food, Restaurant, Cooking, Sickness, Fitness |
| Language | Language and communication |
| Money | Jobs, Business, Money, Shopping |
| Relationships | Marriage, Love, Friends |
| Social issues | Crime, Justice system, Wars, Nature, Automobiles |
| Academic life | School |
| Culture | Holiday, Beliefs, Religion, Japanese things |
| Entertainment | Music, Movies, TV, Sports, Video games |
| Extra-curricular activities | Hobbies, Free time |
| Living situation | Furniture |
| Places/travel | Hometown, City life, Vacation, Travelling |
| Self | Likes, Dislikes, Family, Past and future plans |

TABLE 2
Categories and
textbook topics

The frequency of these topics is displayed in Figure 1. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the most frequent topic by far was about the ‘self’, such as likes and dislikes, family, and future plans, with 37 instances. This was followed by topics related to ‘places and travel’, ‘money’, and ‘entertainment’. The integrated skills textbooks had a higher frequency of topics relating to the ‘self’, while everyday conversation and discussion textbooks had a more equal distribution of the topics. Only one instance of the topic of ‘living situation’ was found in the textbooks, and just two relating to ‘language’ were identified.

Conversation topics

In order to examine the actual topics Japanese L2 users converse about with their friends in English, data were collected at an international university dormitory in Japan.

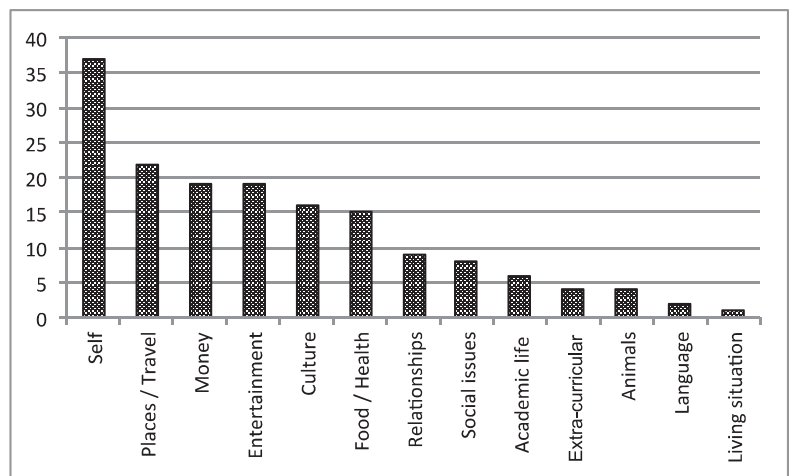


FIGURE 1
Frequency of textbook topics

Context

Despite Japan being a predominantly monolingual country, this particular university professes to be a ‘bilingual’ environment where English is used as the common language. At this university, approximately half of the students are either NSs of English or students with adequate L2 English skills to study at university in English, whose Japanese ability was very limited at the time of entering, having had little or no formal instruction. The other half are domestic Japanese students who all have at least six years of formal English education at the time of entering. Therefore, the Japanese students at this university had many opportunities to interact in English both in and outside of class.

The on-campus dormitory consisted of single- or double-occupancy rooms, a shared kitchen, and shower and laundry facilities. All first year international students were required to live in the dormitories. Japanese students who applied and passed the interview test joined the dormitory. A Japanese first-year student would share a double-occupancy room with a first-year international student.

Recordings in the dormitory were collected since peer-to-peer conversation on campus outside the classroom is the immediate and actual English language use context for the Japanese students at this university. Furthermore, this environment was considered to be similar to study abroad situations that any EFL student might encounter beyond the classroom. Moreover, actual conversation topics were collected, rather than self-reported topics, as researchers have found gaps between what people say they do and what they actually do (Golato 2003).

Participants and instructions

Four Japanese first-year students first volunteered to become the core participants for the research, who would appear in the videos every time. Their paper-based TOEFL scores ranged from 407 to 483 at the time of entry, with an average score of 438 (approximately CEFR level B1–B2). They each selected different student conversation partners from the on-campus dormitory. The partners were 30 different students from ten countries. The non-Japanese partners were from countries including: Botswana, Canada, China, Korea, Indonesia, Romania, Thailand, the United States, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam. The majority of the recordings were pair conversations, some were in threes, and one recording was done in a group of four. Some non-core participant students appeared on the recordings several times. However, these conversations were believed to help identify conversation topics that went beyond the ‘getting acquainted’ stage.

The instructions were limited to (1) the location of recordings to be done in the dormitory, (2) the length of the recordings to be approximately 30 minutes each, and (3) the positioning of the camera so that all participants were visible. Neither the topics of their conversations nor the recording situations were specified. In addition, the researcher was not present at any of the recordings. All recordings, however, took place where participants set the video camera on the kitchen table or their desk, sat in front of the camera and started a conversation. In several recordings, dormitory residents who were not initially in the recording would come to greet the participants, ask questions, or sometimes stay and join the conversation.

The collected data cannot be said to be truly naturally occurring, since the existence of the camera may have had influenced the participants’ performance. However, all conversations were spontaneous and unscripted.

Collected data and analysis

Video recordings were collected across one academic year. In total, 64 recordings, approximately 37 hours worth, were collected from the participants. The video recordings were then fully transcribed using Conversation Analysis conventions (Jefferson 2004).

Topics were identified through the transcripts by locating keywords or themes that participants raised through their talk or questions in the conversations. For instance, Extract 1 is a typical conversation of the collection. Ami (pseudonym) is the Japanese student, and Hang (pseudonym) is her partner from Vietnam. In this case, by identifying keywords, the analysis showed the two participants were talking about

the topics of ‘winter vacation plans’ (place/travel), ‘new year’s holiday’ (culture), and ‘square cake’ (food/health). This method of analysis was performed consistently across all the transcripts.

Extract 1: sample conversation between Ami and Hang

Hang: *sugo:i* (0.4) for [winter vacation] so
wow

Ami: [ya un un

Hang: (0.3) [we can(.) come back home.] (.) and (.)
also enjoy new year holiday(.) very: (.)
interesting (.) [holiday

Ami: [oh: (.) in: (.) er: new year holiday?]

Hang: Ah: (.) ah: in (.) the Vietnamese people also (.)
what (.) to (.) do?

Hang: (0.5) ah: (.) in new year holiday (.) ah:m (.) maybe (.)
er: (.)before the new year eve=

Ami: =un

Hang: (0.6) new year night(.) er we will prepare(.)
fo:r the new year holiday by (.) [making cakes]

Ami: (0.5) ah?

Hang: new year

Ami: square cake?=
=ya [square cake

Ami: [ya hahahaha I heard it

Keyword: Winter vacation, Go back home
Category: Place/Travel

Keyword: New years holiday
Category: Culture

Keyword: Square cake
Category: Food/Health

In total, 1339 topics were identified, including overlaps. On average, each recording included approximately 21 topics. These topics were then divided into the same 13 categories used for the previously explained textbook topic analysis. The categories and example topics are displayed in Table 3. Some topics, such as language classes or life with room-mates could have been categorized as ‘academic life’. However,

| Categories | Example topics |
|-----------------------------|--|
| Animal | Pets |
| Food/health | Food, Restaurants, Cooking, Supermarket, Going to hospital |
| Language | Japanese, Chinese, Language classes |
| Money | Part-time jobs, Shopping, Tuition, Future jobs |
| Relationships | Boyfriend, Friends, Dorm-mates, International marriage |
| Social issues | War, Draft system, Gender roles, Environment |
| Academic life | University courses, Teachers, Homework, Tests, Study abroad |
| Culture | Holiday, Ceremony, Climate, Religion, Behaviours of people of a certain ethnicity |
| Entertainment | Music, Movies, Sports (on TV), Actors |
| Extra-curricular activities | Volunteer group, ‘Culture week’ events, Doing sports |
| Living situation | Dormitory events, Moving out, Looking at apartments, Sharing rooms, Wi-Fi problems |
| Places/travel | Hometown, Travelling, Tokyo, Korea, Visa, Transportation, Vacation plans |
| Self | Family, Future dreams, Age, Homesickness, Appearance |

TABLE 3
Categories from
conversations

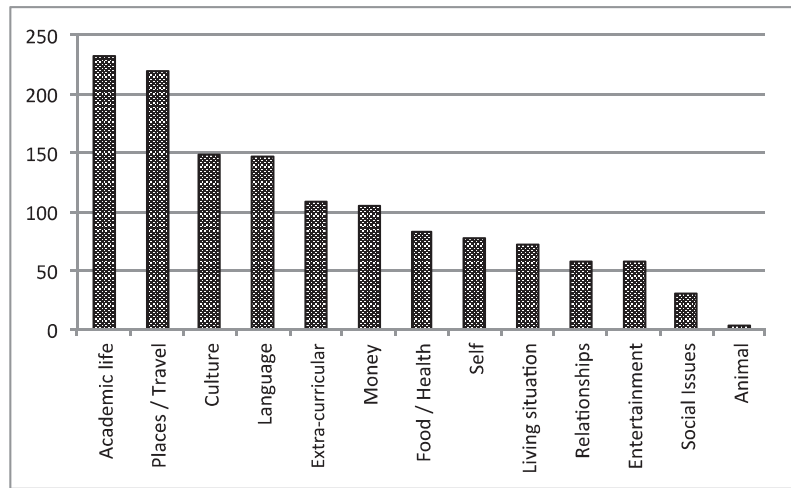


FIGURE 2
Conversation topics

since these topics were frequently identified and were distinct from other topics such as ‘mid-term tests’, instead of categorizing them into ‘academic life’ they were categorized into the more specific categories of ‘language’ and ‘living situation’.

The frequencies of the category occurrences are shown in [Figure 2](#). The following results address the first research question regarding the actual conversation topics in ELF interactions.

As shown in [Figure 2](#), topics related to ‘academic life’ were the most frequent with 231 instances. Common conversations were about the courses the participants were taking, homework they had, who their teachers were, and exams they had to take.

Another popular topic was about places they had been to or wanted to go. As they were enrolled in an international university, it seems that many students were interested in visiting different parts of the world and learning about different cultures and languages. This explains the high frequency of the topics of ‘culture’ and ‘language’ as well. Furthermore, since many of the international students were unfamiliar with the geography of Japan, frequent topics included the Japanese participants’ hometown or recommended places to visit in Japan.

The second reason for the high frequency of ‘place and travel’ topics could be that when participants were not sure what to talk about next, the topic of vacation plans, such as summer break plans, was frequently used. One Japanese participant did this repeatedly even with the same partner across several recordings. Helping students develop variations in conversation topics is therefore necessary to prevent repetitive topics that may hinder a more active interaction and limit the extent or depth of interpersonal communication.

Comparison

In an attempt to further understand the similarities and differences between the textbooks and real-life conversation topics, four larger groupings were made based on common features of the topic: the self, everyday topics, school life, and social topics.

- ‘Self’ and ‘relationship’ were grouped together as ‘the self’ because they were related to personal information such as family structure, human relationships, current mental state, and future dreams.
- General and universal topics such as ‘food and health’, ‘animals’, ‘money’, and ‘entertainment’ were grouped as ‘everyday topics’.
- Topics which are more specifically related to university campus life, such as ‘living situation’, ‘academic life’, ‘extra-curricular activities’, and ‘language’ were grouped as ‘school life’.
- The category ‘social topics’ included topics which are related to life beyond the university campus or everyday general topics, and which are generally more global, such as ‘places and travel’, ‘culture’, and ‘social issues’.

As shown in Figure 3, for textbooks, ‘everyday topics’ comprised approximately 35 per cent of all topics, while ‘social topics’ and ‘the self’ constituted approximately 28 per cent. ‘School life’ topics accounted for only 8 per cent. In contrast, for conversations, ‘school life’ topics covered approximately 42 per cent of all topics. ‘Social topics’ comprised of approximately 30 per cent, ‘everyday topics’ represented 18 per cent, and ‘the self’ was 10 per cent.

The following section will refer to the details of the comparison findings while pertaining to the second research question about bridging the gap between textbook and conversation topics.

Discussion

From the comparison of textbook and conversation topics, and referring back to the literature review, it could be said that local topics were frequently taken up in the conversations, while textbook topics tend to focus on universal and potentially superficial topics.

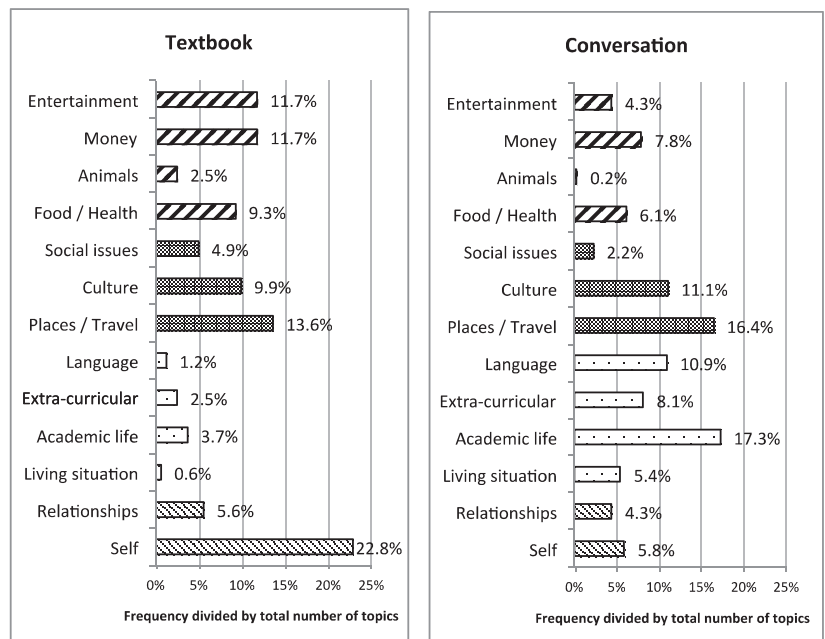


FIGURE 3
Comparison of topics

'Local' here refers to the participants' immediate and shared context of university life and culture of Japan. As seen in Figure 3, local topics related to academia and the school lives of students were high in frequency in the conversations while largely absent in textbooks. These categories include the courses students major in, their language classes, extra-curricular activities, living situations, and also their L1s. It therefore could be suggested that their EFL classes would benefit from introducing topics, vocabulary, and pragmatic conventions related to everyday student life on campus.

In the conversation recordings, for instance, when students were trying to introduce the courses they were taking, the Japanese participants frequently had trouble translating course names from Japanese to English and struggled to explain the course content. As Cummins (op.cit.: 41) points out, academic English is notably more complex than everyday conversation and therefore students need continuous support to manipulate 'more formal abstract language'. The ability to converse about academic topics is critical not only among peers but also for situations beyond the academic environment such as job interviews and networking opportunities. As such, supporting students in the classroom with regards to this area would be beneficial, and the language would be transferable to real-life conversations.

As mentioned earlier, another local topic that was frequent in the conversations was the culture of Japan. One Japanese participant reported after a recording that she could not explain a Japanese holiday (Girl's Day) and the unique food associated with it. Other participants in the recordings also struggled when explaining Japanese food and Japanese virtues such as *aimai* (ambiguity). These instances support McKay's (op.cit.) claim that classroom textbooks need to incorporate local culture. However, this consideration is necessary not only to stimulate interest but also to prepare students for practical language use situations when interacting with people from other cultures.

In contrast, textbook topics did not show any tendency towards local, international, or NS culture. Rather, frequent topics were 'the self' and 'everyday topics' that could be considered universal topics, where common ground could be found even between people with different backgrounds. However, these relatively simple topics were less common in the conversations. Therefore, classes with advanced level learners may need to reconsider the emphasis put on everyday topics, and incorporate specific topics connected to students' lives.

'Social topics', such as 'culture', 'places', and 'travel', were found in similar frequencies between textbooks and conversations. These 'social topics' subsume the topical domains of local, international, and NS culture. The participants in this study were all enrolled in an international university, and their interests in different countries and experiences abroad may have led them to discuss these topics. NS cultural topics were not necessarily conversed about by the NS participants; rather, they were often introduced by the NNSs with experiences of travelling to the NS countries. Therefore, it may be necessary to find out the students' experiences, interests, and needs

when selecting conversation or discussion topics for class, not only to facilitate interest, but also to prepare the students better for real-life interactions. However, a more detailed analysis of the data is necessary in order to further investigate the cultural domains of the topics.

In addition, based on the findings, typical ELF conversations often did not include social issues, nor did the textbooks reviewed in this study. Therefore, classes that have objectives of stimulating critical thinking and raising social awareness may need to include explicit coverage of such controversial and thought-provoking topics to compensate for this lack of exposure.

Furthermore, dividing topics into the domains 'local', 'international', and 'NS' had its limitations, especially when participants have various experiences in multiple cultures. In interactions with participants with multicultural backgrounds and international interests, the boundaries between these groupings became blurred, especially between NS and international cultures. This highlights the need for more investigations into ELF conversations and to go beyond the NS/NNS divide when analysing topics in textbooks and conversations.

Authenticity of topics

Returning to the point of 'authenticity' of topics, one distinct difference between the conversations and textbooks was the wide range of topics included in the conversation categories of 'academic life', 'extra-curricular activities', and 'living situation' compared to the textbook categories. For example, while students were discussing volunteering and preparing for school events in the recordings, the textbook only provided relatively superficial topics of hobbies and free time. These topics are quite distinct in the depth of vocabulary and the details needed for precise explanations, which textbooks seemed to be lacking. The same could be said for the categories of 'academic life' and 'culture' where more variety of topics within these categories was addressed in the conversations. Therefore, students may benefit from developing their language across a wider range of topics even within one topic category.

Moreover, investigating workplace interactions and their topics may have more relevance and practicality for students with the desire to join international companies. Furthermore, when analysing the transcripts, spoken genres such as 'interviews' were also noticed embedded within these mundane conversations. Identifying spoken genres within the talk and analysing how they relate to conversation topics may be beneficial for students and deepen our understanding of naturally occurring interactions.

Nevertheless, this article has illuminated gaps between the frequent topics in typical Japanese ELT textbooks and L2 user conversations, and suggests further investigations on L2 user interactions for a better understanding of learners' needs.

Conclusion

This study investigated the authenticity of textbook topics in comparison to actual ELF conversations. Topics in language classrooms influence student confidence, WTC, and the language learning process. In spite of its significance, topic authenticity of textbooks has been under-investigated. Furthermore, little is known about authentic conversation topics in terms of L2 user norms. To address this gap in

the literature, this study has investigated textbook topics and compared them to actual ELF conversations. It has suggested additional topics for the English language classroom based on empirical evidence outside the classroom in everyday situations of student life. Depending on student age, experience, and interests, as well as course objectives, teachers might consider incorporating a selection of topics related to the area of 'school life' to supplement standard textbooks. By incorporating more topics that are authentic to the specific interests and contexts of the L2 users, I believe the EFL classroom can provide a more suitable context to better prepare students for the 'world out there'.

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Note

- 1 ELF is used here to refer to English spoken as a contact language between speakers from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

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Appendix 1

Selected textbooks

Clankie, S. M. and **T. Kobayashi.** 2010. *Taking Sides*. Tokyo: Sanshusha.

Helgesen, M., S. Brown, T. Mandeville, and **M. Rost.** 2007. *English Firsthand New Gold 1*. Hong Kong: Pearson Longman.

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