

Evaluating A Textbook for Japanese Junior High School Students

David O'Connor

This article will evaluate the New Horizon textbook, which is currently taught to Japanese junior high school students. It will evaluate the suitability of this book for a specific group of learners. A detailed profile of the group of learners will be provided with the following in mind:

- (i) A general evaluation of the selected course book. This commentary will be supported page reference examples. This section will be more teacher focused.
- (ii) Content evaluation of the suitability of the material in the book for the specific group of learners. In this case, the learner group will be Japanese junior high school students. Page reference examples will support this reasoning. This section of the article will be more student focused.
- (iii) A focused example, using one page from the book.

Key Words: [TEFL] [Textbook] [New Horizon]

(Received September 24, 2021)

1. Learner profile

Before we evaluate the textbook, it is important to establish a learner profile first. After all, it is the learners who will be using the textbook. The learner profile is a Japanese junior high school second grade class. The students are A1 (CEFR beginner) level. Japanese class sizes can range from less than 10 students, to nearly 40. Public school classes are usually mixed between male and female students, aged 13 or 14. The classes are mostly Japanese, with much smaller minority groups. The student's L1 are correspondingly overwhelmingly Japanese. The learners are generally not confident English speakers, and many students have a negative perception of English. This can be due to many reasons, which go beyond the scope of this article. Japanese students usually don't readily answer questions. The learners are looking to improve their English to get into a good high school. It is also mandatory to attend junior high school. Most students have never travelled abroad. The assistant language teacher (ALT) is often their only experience of the world outside Japan. By second year, all of the learners have studied English for at least one year. They do

* Kagoshima Immaculate Heart College, English Department, 4-22-1 Toso, Kagoshima-shi 890-8525, Japan

not use English in their daily lives. The students can use the present simple tense and can conjugate high frequency verbs. The learners have not yet covered other tenses. The students frequently make errors with sentence structure and pronunciation. The students often do activities with the ALT, and seem to enjoy breaking the monotony of their daily classwork.

1.2. Textbook Choice and Rationale

Textbook: *New Horizon 2*, Tokyo Shoseki, 2016 edition.

An article by Tim Dalby summarises why this text was chosen:

“Throughout the world, teachers of English language are thrust into a classroom, course book in hand and told, ‘Teach that!’ It is neither ideal, nor pedagogically sound, but it is the reality of an ever-expanding and diverse industry.” (p163)

During his time teaching in junior high schools in 2016, the author experienced a transition in school textbooks. Students changed from *New Horizon* to the *New Crown* series. In this author’s opinion, *New Horizon* is a much better book. Visually it looks good, with fresh art and new anime-style characters in the 2016 edition. One of the characters, Emily, even became an Internet meme (the less said about that the better). The book provides good coverage of English grammar and vocabulary as well as using authentic language and skills practice. It should be noted that a direct comparison of the *New Horizon* and *New Crown* series is a separate topic than what this article will cover.

2.1 Layout and General Presentation

The book layout starts with the characters introducing a topic through a discussion using the target language. This is usually introducing a new tense, with another grammar point introduced after the tense later in the chapter. This article will provide screenshots of the textbook in the appendix, so please refer to these when pages are mentioned. For example, Unit 2 introduces how to use the future continuous tense, while later in the chapter the command “show me” is introduced. The layout is consistent, making it easy for students and teachers to follow.

This book is suitable for the target learner group, as set by the Japanese public school curriculum. Other public school textbooks in line with the country-wide curriculum counterparts cover very similar language at the same level (including *New Crown*). But *New Horizon*’s presentation is notably effective. *New Horizon* creates opportunities to use authentic

language in realistic, practical situations. It has clearly laid out activities, consistent colour headers to differentiate each section, and is not too 'busy', or cluttered, with plenty of white space and fresh, excellently designed characters.

2.2 Interest

The topics are generally interesting, and easy to teach. They are relatable to the students, and can effectively make use of an ALT. For example, the topic "I'm going to" (p12) was easy to provide examples for as a teacher - "I'm going to Tokyo" etc. The teacher can use images or get the students to guess where the teacher will visit. At A1 level, it is important to make the topic understandable and *New Horizon* is effective at doing this. Some students will not be interested where their teacher will visit. But there is always room for adaptation using a textbook. It can be made more effective by the teacher. Asking the students where they will or want to visit can engage with them more effectively. Some of the topics are obscure, later there is a story about an old clock (Unit 6, p58) but the core language introduced is sound, and this can be scaled up or scaled down by the teacher.

2.3 Variety

The books' topics are varied. For example, Unit 2 covers A *Trip To...*, while Unit 4 is about a *Homestay in the United States* and Unit 6 covers the *Story of an Old Clock*. These topics are not linear in progression, and are stand alone, but do build up on previous language learned, as well as *New Horizon 1*, learned in the students' first year. This keeps it easy to follow and to teach. It also encourages a continuation of using the series. The variety of topics is also useful in keeping the students as interested as possible in the class. Even if some of the students dislike English, they can expect that no two English classes will be the same. The book offers different activities as well as topics. Learners will always have the topic introduction, followed by a reading for communication, a listening section and a speaking section. Some units also print song lyrics in English.

2.4 Practice

The Reading for Communication section in Unit 2 (p16) is useful practice. The activity is controlled. This can be used by the teacher to check student understanding. Due to the nature of the curriculum, many teachers simply do the activity as displayed. This can be a wasted opportunity, and is not really a reflection of the textbook. Rather it is the reality of working within the confines of a curriculum.

One weakness of the Reading for Communication activity practice is that it is not too

engaging with the students. Again, the activity can be adapted by the teacher. Having students working in pairs or small groups to fill in the blanks could liven up the class, or the activity can be used as a warm up to another related activity. This example of a practice activity is consistent throughout the book, so the students come to expect this.

2.5 Skills

Each Unit is extremely consistent, which provides a solid foundation for the students to work from. The Units offer a range of integrative skills activities, including Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, activities which focus on vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, creativity, and asking questions. The anime-style pictures throughout are a culturally effective way to engage the students while activating the schemata. It gives the teacher plenty of opportunities to have a warm-up into each new activity.

The consistency is good for students, and for younger learners, who could benefit from having a routine in a difficult subject. The students could use the characters to act out or role play situations and skills covered in the book. The Listening Plus section is accompanied by a CD to be used by the teacher, and the listening quality is good. The skills are also variable and flexible which can be effectively used to fit in with the rhythm of a classroom.

2.6 Level

Any textbook level should be appropriately aimed at the target learner group (Dalby p152). *New Horizon* is appropriate for second grade Japanese junior high school students. As determined by the Japanese Ministry of Education public junior high school curriculum, all of the different course books cover the same material. The consistent range of activities within each unit can be adapted by the teacher to the strengths and weaknesses of the students. *New Horizon* effectively allows the teacher to utilise the materials in a targeted practice.

Returning to the Unit 2 example, the level is appropriate, and can be adapted to be more interesting to the students by asking where they want to visit themselves. The teacher is necessary, not only to aid the students at A1 level, but also to make the topics more engaging and attractive to the students. The book consistently provides these opportunities. At its core the textbook's level is challenging, but it should not overwhelm the students.

2.7 Authenticity

New Horizon is usually good at providing authentic language to students. However, there

are some keywords that the students will learn via flashcards and the teacher. There is also some vocabulary in the textbook which is unnecessary at A1 level. For example, the highlighted keyword **Moai** (p14) is arguably not useful to learn at A1 level. The students will probably never use this word outside of class. Other phrases such as “I practised XYZ hard” are common in Japanese English, but not in other countries, which can be confusing for Japanese students when they realise this later. This is a weakness of the books, and unfortunately this weakness is found in other textbooks for this learner group. However, the range of situations and dialogue are usually authentic, with only certain keywords and phrases raising questions. These points will probably be noticed by teachers, rather than the students, who will be learning the material for the first time.

2.8 Learner autonomy

In Japan, much like Korea, as described by Dalton (p151) there is pressure to finish the textbooks provided, even if a change in texts have occurred. Indeed, finishing the book is demanded by the curriculum. This can limit learner autonomy. However, with teacher intervention, this can change. For example, with the reading sections, the students can use dictionaries themselves. Japanese teachers frequently employ this strategy.

The students' level will be too low to discuss the textbook's content for themselves. The language introduced can be used outside the classroom, but this is often unrealistic. The students generally don't speak English outside of class, and this greatly limits their English language learner autonomy. A good teacher who inspires them to use the material outside class is not always available. However, *New Horizon* itself does offer the potential for student learner autonomy.

2.9 Extras

New Horizon 2 comes with extra materials, including the teacher's book, which is the same as the student copy, except it is all in Japanese, expanding activities and offering teaching tips. It also comes with the student's workbook, a listening CD, and the textbook is available online via LAN in Japanese schools. Each unit's emboldened keywords are reflected in a flashcard accompaniment. They are all easy to use, which will aid teaching the students.

The extra materials are not especially engaging. The students, workbook activities are mostly controlled, fill-the-blank style activities. The listening CD is only used by the teacher, although the quality is quite good. A minor point with the CD is that all of the dialects are American, which limits the students' exposure to English - they sometimes find the ALT's English confusing. That said, the Japanese learn American English in their curriculum, and

the CD is in line with this.

3. A Detailed Examination

3.1 This section of the article will focus on one page from the book: *New Horizon*, Unit 2 Emi Goes Abroad, p12 2a). It will examine why it is suitable for the learner group described.

This unit introduces the future continuous tense. It is suitable for the learner group of second grade Japanese junior high school students. As previously discussed, the level of the textbook is appropriate for the learners. The topic is interesting, and can be made more engaging with the students by asking them where they would like to visit.

Grant (1990), talking about the use of textbooks, asks if it (the textbook) fits, how well does it fit, and how does it compare with others that also fit. *New Horizon* has an edge over its competitors with the art used. The overall layout of the page will not overwhelm students. Other textbooks covering the same topic often have static and dated art, which doesn't engage the viewer, both teacher and student.

The textbox at the bottom of the page is additionally easy for students to focus on when it comes to test times and other situations.

3.2 Can the textbook material be adapted any or all of the material to make it more suitable for the group of learners?

Cunningsworth has an oft-cited but appropriate quote in:

We should not be looking for the perfect coursebook which meets all our requirements, but rather for the best possible fit between what the coursebook offers and what we as teachers and students need. (1984:8)

The materials should suit the needs, interests, and abilities of the students. The material should also suit the teacher. The best book in the world won't work in a classroom if the teacher has good reasons for disliking it. And the materials must meet the needs of official public teaching syllabuses or examinations. The teacher in this case does not have a choice in choosing the textbook. As this article has outlined, *New Horizon 2* has limitations. It is not a perfect textbook. However, it offers a wide range of opportunities to adapt to make activities more suitable in a classroom.

The example of Unit 2, p12 introduces the topic with a conversation between two of the textbooks' characters. This can offer an opportunity for the teacher to do a roleplay, or a skit - style warmup of the topic. This can be done with the teacher and students, or among the students themselves.

This can also be continued on p13, where the command “show me” is used. It is a challenge with this learner group doing this in a class of 30 plus teenagers. One activity could be the class could make their own passports and act the roleplay in pairs, switching roles from the officer to the passenger. The teacher can monitor this throughout.

Moving onto the Reading for Communication on pages 14 and 15, this passage will be a good opportunity for the teacher to work with the students on the various sub-skills of reading. The teacher can use the questions provided by the book, or create their own questions for the students to answer from the text in order to have them practice the skill of reading for specific information (i.e. how many maois are on Easter Island?). It would then build to a comprehension activity of the text, asking students do they believe that the statues walked to the beach. Some students are stronger at the various sub-skills of reading than others. By introducing tasks which guide the students through the various skills of reading, it will provide an opportunity for the weaker students to practice. This will be limited at A1 level. A problem with this text is the repetition of the word maoi, which is not a common English word at A1 level. However, for the exercise, it will be necessary to include and pre-teach this before reading occurs. The imagery in the passage offers an opportunity to discuss things with the students - for example, imagine a paradise island, were the maois alive and walking?, what are they thinking about? This might be very challenging for A1 level students, but the opportunity is provided by the textbook nonetheless.

The following Reading for Communication on p16 and Listening exercises on p17 are very practical. They could expand on the textbooks' questions for the listening exercise. The teachers' book has questions, and the students' book is very visual in presenting the answers. The questions would have to be very specific and focused, but listening subskills could still be used here, with close listening, or listening for gist for example. The Reading for Communication is a fill-in-the-blanks exercise. This can be quickly completed by the students and be used as a warm up to a conversation-based activity. Practising the model in the book can lead into a conversation where the students can talk about a place they've researched themselves and want to visit, or a feature in their own city. They can then present it to each other, or to the teacher.

The final section on p18 is really a reference section, and can be used by the students to focus on during test time. The songs presented on p19 might be a different listening activity, where the students can try to find the lyrics, but this is optional. At A1 level the amount of English condensed into a song would be a challenge. The final section, Speaking Plus 1 on pages 20 and 21 would be more practical, where the students could act out the dialogue in pairs or as a skit in front of the class where we can assess their skills. This activity would additionally use intonation, and word stress in the dialogue.

Conclusion

This article evaluated *New Horizon*, which is a popular Japanese junior high school textbook. It evaluated the suitability of this book for a specific group of learners. In this case, the book was found to be an effective textbook for teaching English to a class of second year Japanese junior high school students.

This report focuses on a few aspects of the use of the *New Horizon* textbook. A general evaluation of the textbook was undertaken. This commentary was supported with page reference examples. A full appendix can be provided by the author, but images of *New Horizon* and the course content can be readily found online. The content evaluation found that the material was largely suitable for second year junior high school students, and that the textbook's target audience have largely been met. However, as with any textbook, it does have limitations.

A teacher can enhance this textbook both inside and outside the classroom. Exclusive use of the textbook may not be enough to maximise English learning potential. However, if one has to use a textbook for teaching junior high school students in Japan, *New Horizon* is an excellent choice.

References

- Cunningsworth, A. 1984. *Evaluating and Selecting EFL Teaching Materials*. Heinemann.
- Dalby, T. 2009 *Adapting Your CourseBook: Becoming Skilled in the Art of Manipulation*. Jeonju University. Pp 145-166
- Englipedia* 2017 (had a full outline of the book's content). Available from: http://www.englipedia.net/Pages/JHS_Textbook_2012_NewHorizon02.aspx [last accessed 05/11/2017, but currently offline]
- Grant, N. 1990. *Making the most of your Textbook*. Longman Keys to Language Teaching. Longman.
- New Horizon*, 2016 Tokyo Shoseki
- Tokyo Shoseki, Publisher (in Japanese), Available from: <http://www.tokyo-shoseki.co.jp/> [last accessed 02/17/2020]