

A Summary of the Results of Student and Teacher Evaluations of *New Perspectives*

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Introduction

Asia University provides a unique English program to its freshmen students. Freshmen at Asia University study English extensively with native speakers of English in sessions which last forty-five minutes, four days per week. They also receive intensive training with Japanese teachers of English in one, forty-five minute per week session. This enables the students to experience English language training on a daily basis with both native-speaking and Japanese-speaking teachers of English. In these courses, students make use of materials developed expressly for them. This article will focus on student and teacher feedback on the textbook, which was developed for use in the native-teacher portion of the course.

History of the Development of *New Perspectives*

The Freshman English Program (FEP), which functions under the auspices of the English Language Education Research Institute (ELERI), is a relatively new program at Asia University. Therefore, the curricular objectives of the program are just emerging from their formative stages. The materials used previously focused strictly on aural/oral communicative tasks of survival English, which are often associated with second language teaching programs. Faculty and administrators began to question the rationale behind a strictly aural/oral approach, especially in

light of the fact that many of their students will not, in the future, find themselves in situations where survival language is needed. Indeed, only 40% of Asia University students study in a special study program in the United States. Asia University determined that the general population of freshmen needed a different approach to language teaching. Asia University sought, therefore, to develop in-house materials which would better serve the needs and interests of its students and better fit the developing goals of the Freshman English Program.

Asia University turned to the five American consortium schools which offer the Asia University America Program to 40% of all sophomores. The consortium responded by sending two faculty members to assist in the development of textbook materials and a placement testing tool for the FEP. These faculty members also assisted in the development of other administrative tools for managing the efforts of the twenty-three, full-time, native-speaking faculty members (ELERI instructional staff).

Several members of the English Department, the ELERI Director, and the two consultants from the consortium developed objectives for the FEP in addition to an outline of topics and tasks which the new textbook should cover. Work began on the project immediately. Members of the English Department as well as several members of the ELERI instructional staff worked on an editorial board to assist in the development of the textbook. After the text itself had been produced, many ELERI teachers worked toward producing the audio-tape which accompanies the textbook.

Overview of *New Perspectives*

New Perspectives is a theme-based, integrated-skills textbook. There are two versions of the two-volume textbook which are meant to satisfy the language needs of Asia University's freshmen at all proficiency levels. The themes of the text revolve around issues relevant to young adults, such as education, working, and cultural diversity. All language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and vocabulary) are developed around these themes. The topics relate mainly to the Japanese experience since it is assumed that the students may need to communicate about their own culture in business or other international contexts in the future. The themes draw on the students' existing knowledge; the materials assist the students in increasing their ability to communicate about these topics using English as the medium of exchange.

The text provides two types of readings: those which are descriptive in nature and those which are more controversial. Critical thinking is developed through introspection, opinion formation, and communication activities.

An audio-tape, which provides additional information about the topics, was developed for the text. The accompanying exercises in the textbook provide task-based listening activities. Since the textbook and tape are distributed as a set, each student is encouraged to receive additional listening practice at home.

Overview of the Evaluation Process

As the text is currently being implemented, we have thus far received feedback only on the first volume of the text. The purpose of surveying both students and teachers was twofold.

First, we wanted to assess whether or not the students felt that the text was satisfying their needs and whether the teachers felt that the text was meeting the objectives of the program. Secondly, we wanted to gain input which could be used in revising the text.

The students were given a sixty-item, multiple choice survey at the end of their first semester of study in the FEP during one of the native-speaker's class periods. The survey was divided into three parts. The first twenty-four questions related directly to the effectiveness and usefulness of *New Perspectives*. The next ten questions related to the effectiveness of the native-speaking English teacher. The final twenty-six questions related to the effectiveness of the FEP. The first two sections of the survey were developed in English and then translated into Japanese. I will review only the portion of the survey which relates to the textbook. The students responded using mark sheets which were machine-scored. Results were grouped according to the level of the students.

An open-ended survey was also distributed to the twenty-three, native-speaking instructional staff members. Comments regarding strengths and weaknesses, as well as recommendations for changes, were solicited. The teachers had more than one week to respond to this survey. They had the option of responding anonymously. The author and some members of the editorial board as well as the Director of ELERI reviewed these surveys.

Content of the Surveys

The student surveys contained questions which can be grouped into four sections: one question about the students' overall

opinion of the text, specific questions about the usefulness of each section of the book and the tape, questions pertaining to the level of difficulty of the text readings and exercises in general, and questions about the students' level of interest in the topics. All questions and responses were presented to the students in written Japanese.

The teacher surveys contained open-ended questions. Specifically the teachers were asked to list the strengths and weaknesses of the text, which sections of the text they consistently used or skipped, what materials and activities they used as supplements, and specific errors they noticed while using the textbook.

Limitations of the Surveys

There are several limitations to the student surveys and any analysis of the information gained from these surveys. First, Japanese students are unaccustomed to evaluating either their teachers' performances or the effectiveness of the materials used in a formalized way. This may have affected their responses to the items related to the textbook. Second, a five-point scale (range of responses) was used on most student survey items. Students may have tended toward the median response since this might have been viewed as the most neutral. Third, because of a constraint on human resources, only machine-scored responses could be gained from the students. The students may have had other valuable feedback to share if they had been able to give their responses in their own words. Also, since none of teachers except the author and editors were intimately acquainted with the textbook, the

students were experiencing each teacher's first attempt at using the materials. Finally, the teachers' own attitudes toward the textbook (including those of the author who also taught from the text) may have affected the presentation of these materials and therefore the students' positive or negative perceptions of the textbook.

There are also several limitations to the teacher surveys. First, the survey itself makes no reference to the curricular objectives of the program, so the teacher would have to infer this in determining the strengths or weaknesses of the textbook. Second, the questions provided little structure and may have been too open-ended. Finally, no information regarding how the exercises or readings were adapted by the teachers was explicitly solicited.

Results of the Student Surveys

The student surveys were separated into five groups depending on the students' level. In total, 1,438 students responded to the survey. All of the groups responded very similarly. The median for all responses on all items indicates that the students found the textbook, topics, and activities satisfactory or better.

The following is a representation of at least one item from each of the four major sections of the survey in table form. The first item shown below relates to the question: What is your general opinion of the book, *New Perspectives*? The responses correspond to the following scale: 1 = very bad, 2 = bad, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = good, 5 = very good.

response	1	2	3	4	5	mean
Volume 1, high	26	93	191	68	10	2.9
Volume 1, low	4	54	183	111	18	3.2
Volume 1a, high	6	28	131	50	7	3.1
Volume 1a, mid	11	26	122	71	5	3.1
Volume 1a, low	5	17	116	76	4	3.3

Table 1 Students' General Opinion of *New Perspectives*

The mean for each group is quite similar, with the lowest-level groups (Volume 1, low and Volume 1a, low) rating the textbook slightly more favorably than the other three groups.

Table Two represents the second type of question: questions related to the level of difficulty of the readings and exercises in the textbook. The question was: How would you rate the level of difficulty of the Main Reading in each chapter of *New Perspectives*? The responses correspond to this scale: 1 = very difficult, 2 = difficult, 3 = OK, 4 = easy, 5 = very easy.

response	1	2	3	4	5	mean
Volume 1, high	3	41	188	125	29	3.4
Volume 1, low	5	66	219	68	13	3.0
Volume 1a, high	4	9	144	56	10	3.3
Volume 1a, mid	4	17	152	57	6	3.2
Volume 1a, low	7	48	134	22	6	2.9

Table 2 Level of Difficulty of the Main Reading

The responses to this and other questions related to the level of difficulty of different sections of the textbook reveal a predictable pattern of each of the highest levels of students using each volume rating the text slightly easier than the other three groups.

Table Three shows student responses to a sample question about usefulness of particular sections of the book. The question was:

How useful was the Discussion Techniques and Activities section of *New Perspectives*? The responses indicate: 1 = not useful, 2 = satisfactory, 3 = useful. Students could also indicate if their teacher had not used that section or if they did not know.

response	1	2	3	mean
Volume 1, high	33	196	60	2.1
Volume 1, low	13	180	92	2.3
Volume 1a, high	11	106	56	2.2
Volume 1a, mid	14	122	52	2.2
Volume 1a, low	9	104	35	2.2

Table Three Usefulness of the Discussion Activities

The responses to this and other items related to the usefulness of each section of the textbook show that the students responded very similarly, regardless of their level of language proficiency. From these questions it appears that the students rate the exercises as at least satisfactory.

The final two tables relate to the students' level of interest in the topics presented in the two units of Volumes 1 and 1a. Table Four shows the students' level of interest in the first unit of the text, which was comprised of three chapters on Japanese and American education. Table Five shows the students' responses regarding the second unit of the textbook, which was composed of three chapters on student lifestyles in Japan. The responses are as follows: 1 = not at all interesting, 2 = not very interesting, 3 = somewhat interesting, 4 = interesting, 5 = very interesting.

response	1	2	3	4	5	mean
Volume 1, high	28	69	188	90	13	3.0
Volume 1, low	12	43	181	123	12	3.2
Volume 1a, high	5	32	113	67	6	3.2
Volume 1a, mid	6	27	135	65	4	3.1
Volume 1a, low	4	24	136	53	1	3.1

Table Four Level of Interest in the Unit on Education

response	1	2	3	4	5	mean
Volume 1, high	20	55	173	112	28	3.2
Volume 1, low	9	33	144	157	28	3.4
Volume 1a, high	4	27	109	70	12	3.3
Volume 1a, mid	7	23	122	72	13	3.3
Volume 1a, low	5	23	124	64	2	3.2

Table Five Level of Interest in the Unit on Student Lifestyles

These items reveal that the students generally found the topics somewhat interesting. They seemed to prefer the topics on student lifestyles, perhaps because these chapters of the textbook related to issues which young adults encounter in their personal lives.

Overall, responses on all items of the survey are remarkably similar. Surprisingly, there were few, if any, differences in perceptions of the students with different levels of language proficiency. It appears that the students are generally satisfied with the textbook.

Results of the Teacher Surveys

Thirteen of the twenty-three native-speaking instructors submitted the completed survey forms. Of these thirteen, six of the surveys were from teachers using Volume 1 of the text. The remaining seven surveys related to Volume 1a.

Responses to Volume 1 were overall very positive. The main weakness of the text which was pointed out by the teachers using Volume 1 is the level and usefulness of the vocabulary. Several teachers advised making use of higher frequency vocabulary items which would be useful in conversation. Teachers seemed in general agreement that the grammar portion of the text was redundant since the Japanese English instructors often focus their portion of the course on grammar. The native-speaking teachers consistently utilize the readings, listening section, discussion development, vocabulary exercises and writing portions of the book. They reported limited use of the optional extension exercises, the grammar section, and pronunciation portions of the book. Some teachers supplemented their own listening activities instead of using the listening tasks provided in the book and on the tape. Common materials to supplement the course were video tapes, additional readings, cloze exercises, quizzes, and conversational activities.

Responses to Volume 1a tended to be more varied. The most common weakness cited was that the textbook was written at a level too high for some of the teachers' classes. The speakers on the tapes were found to deliver too quickly. The level of the vocabulary was also cited as too high for the students. These instructors suggested more recycling of commonly used vocabulary. The teachers also seemed to agree that grammar instruction is best left to the Japanese instructor of English. It was suggested that the writing portion of the text focus more on idea generation, rather than sentence formation. Positive comments were varied.

Some of these teachers liked the integrated-skills approach. Others liked the graphic materials presented in some of the readings and in the speaking activities. Common materials and activities used to supplement the textbook were conversational activities, games, quizzes, dictations, and projects.

Implications

Since the student surveys only revealed that the students were neither egregiously dissatisfied nor outrageously thrilled by the textbook, the process of seeking student feedback may need to be restructured if more meaningful information is to be solicited from the students. However, we can at the very least assume from their perceptions that we are meeting most of their needs with this textbook.

As a result of the teacher surveys, there will be some changes in the textbook for the coming year. The most significant change is that the grammar portion of the text is being omitted. Another major change is that the writing development and exercises in the first several chapters of the textbook are being rewritten. While it is felt that it is difficult at best to incorporate daily conversational activities into a theme-based textbook, some modifications are being considered which will make the materials more interactive. Teachers will continue to be encouraged to supplement this type of activity as they see fit. The vocabulary definitions will be simplified, and there will be an attempt to recycle more vocabulary words. A second, further simplification of the text is under consideration for the very weakest students.

Conclusions

Considering the scope of the textbook development project, the human and material resources available for the project, and the limited time allowed for completion of the textbook, it is my feeling that everyone associated with this project should feel proud of the product. The shift in focus from an aural/oral approach to an integrated-skills approach to language teaching was not easy for all of the instructional staff involved. It is my firm belief, however, that both students and teachers gain through the development of critical thinking and communication skills. The students have an opportunity to build their language, reasoning, and communication skills. The teachers have the satisfaction of teaching in a well-rounded program in which language is viewed as a medium of exchanging ideas and not merely as a tool to meet imaginary survival needs.

While the survey results are not overwhelming, they seem satisfactory. From my own experience teaching from the text and from talking with others who were using the book, it seems that *New Perspectives* is like many other textbooks: some portions of the text need further explanation, supplementation or simplification. Overall, I had quite a bit of success with the book. My personal assessment: both volumes are usable.

Since we often assess the success of materials on what the students can later produce, I am very eager to see the "products" of this new approach and the new materials when the first group of students who have used *New Perspectives* come to the Asia University America Program beginning in April of this year. I

speculate that the students may not be fully prepared to interact in functional language situations upon arrival, although I think that they will quickly learn the necessary skills through some of their classes in the Asia University America Program and through interacting in actual, and therefore meaningful, survival situations. I do feel, however, that these students will be better prepared to participate in group discussions both in our classes and in formal and informal meetings with their American counterparts on and off campus. I feel that they will be more attuned to communicating their opinions and ideas, and it is my hope that they will be more receptive to others' ideas and opinions as a result.