



Text Review

Travel Abroad Project

by Richard McMahon

Nan'un-do (2005) ISBN4-523-17488-1 C0082



Currently there are at least ten texts in the Japanese ELT market devoted to study abroad-related themes. Many focus on travel to specific destinations such as Nishikage, Haginoya, Tamura and Dillon's *Let's Go Abroad: Takeshi's Journey to the USA* (2010) or Snowden and Snowden's *London Alive: Survival English* (2012). McMahon's text allows students to select their own destinations and adopts a task-based learning framework.

This text is designed to help university level students improve their English research and presentation skills and also to increase their familiarity with various travel abroad destinations. This 63-page text includes a 39-page student workbook and a CD-ROM. A detailed Teacher's Manual is also available.

During the 2013 academic year I used this text for two university EFL classes: a group of 28 first-year students with TOEIC scores from 380 - 420 and another for 24 second-year students with slightly higher TOEIC scores. At the end of the academic year, a textbook evaluation questionnaire was administered to the 38 students who were in the class that day. A copy of that form is online at <http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/7-1-ApA.pdf> and its English translation (with student responses) appears in Appendix B. I also completed a teacher textbook evaluation form, which can be seen in Appendix C. The semester-final exams, which I developed based mainly on the text material, provided additional evidence about how well students were meeting the text objectives. Those exams are available online at <http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/7-1-ApD.pdf>

The Nuts & Bolts

Each of the text's ten main units starts off with an explicit vocabulary priming activity. 7 - 8 English words are matched with an equal number of synonyms or descriptive phrases. This was rated as the "most useful" part of this text by 27 of the 38 students who completed the form in Appendix A. Although this text is laudable for its avoidance of Japanese, the semester final exams suggest that most students mastered only about half of the textbook vocabulary. More precisely, when asked to construct a meaningful question using eight random vocabulary items from the text, the average student could do so with only about half of the items. This suggests that only some of the students engaged in "deep vocabulary learning" as envisioned by Craik and Lockhart (1972).

The next section of each main unit is a 2 - 3 paragraph reading passage about a travel theme. From a language learning perspective, I felt that this passage should have been more task-based by adopting a cloze format to give students a specific task to attend to. As Ellis (2003, p. 87) reminds us, without concrete tasks to perform, it is easy for some students to become disengaged.

After this, three pair discussion questions appeared. What surprised me most about these questions is how widely their CEFR difficulty levels varied. Whereas questions such as "Have you ever flown in a helicopter?" (p. 44) presented no problem to most students, others such as "How does knowing about the arts raise your awareness?" (p. 20) were too difficult for students. As Fujiwara (2010, p. 136) indicates, many texts now target their content to specific CEFR levels. I feel this text would have been more successful with a tighter degree of vocabulary control.

Subsequent activities in this text varied somewhat from chapter to chapter. A particularly nice feature of this text was the self-reflective question section towards the end of each chapter. Those



helped at least some students consider what they are actually learning and indirectly promoted more reflectivity.

The accompanying student workbook received lukewarm student ratings. Although some of its activities are well designed, others need revision. For example, having students write down (or photocopy) their credit cards, passports, and detailed personal contacts puts too much personal information in a non-secure place. It also violates government privacy guidelines (MEXT, 2006). In my opinion, what should appear in the workbook is more grammar, vocabulary, and spelling exercises. The need to highlight how related terms such as *cooks*, *cooking*, *dishes*, *dinners*, and *diners* differ was evident when a few students wrote questions such as, “Have you ever eaten Russian cooks?”

The Bottom Line

In many ways, this textbook is a diamond in the rough. The overall idea behind this text is engaging and there is a laudable clarity in its aims. If I likened this text to a computer software program, it would be tempting to describe it as a “Beta Version” product. It does have a number of attractive features, but also notable bugs that should be revised.

When students were asked, “To what extent would you recommend this text for next year's course?” the response was tepid: with a 7-point Likert scale ranging from +3 to -3, the mean response for this sample was a neutral zero (SD = 1.39). This suggests that classroom opinions were equally divided about this text. Although I feel lots of it is excellent, the current version (now in its sixth printing) is overdue for an upgrade.

- reviewed by Tim Newfields
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Works Cited

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Appendix A: The original Japanese survey

(Available online at <http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/7-1-ApA.pdf>)

Appendix B: English Translation of the *Travel Abroad Project* Student Evaluation Form with Student Responses

NOTE: Student ratings and comments appear in blue. – T. N.

Part I. Respond to each of the questions below by checking the number that most closely matches your opinion according to the following scale:

-3 = very much not so -2 = clearly not so -1 = slightly not so 0 = neutral +1 = slightly so +2 = clearly so +3 = very much so

1. How well did this textbook cover the material outlined in the course syllabus?

-3: -2: 3% (n=1) -1: 0: 42% (n=16) +1: 16% (n=11) +2: 16% (n=9) +3: NR=3% (n=1)

2. How clear were the objectives of this text?

-3: -2: 5% (n=2) -1: 8% (n=3) 0: 16% (n=7) +1: 18% (n=8) +2: 39% (n=15) +3: 3% (n=1) NR=5% (n=2)

3. How helpful were the audio recordings that accompanied this text?

-3: 21% (n=8) -2: 13% (n=5) -1: 10% (n=4) 0: 29% (n=11) +1: 16% (n=6) +2: 3% (n=1) +3: NR=8% (n=3)

4. To what extent did this textbook help you to improve your presentation skills?

-3: 3% (n=1) -2: 8% (n=3) -1: 5% (n=2) 0: 18% (n=7) +1: 50% (n=19) +2: 8% (n=3) +3: NR=8% (n=3)

5. How clear were the instructions for the various activities in this text?

-3: -2: 5% (n=2) -1: 8% (n=3) 0: 37% (n=14) +1: 29% (n=11) +2: 8% (n=5) +3: 3% (n=1) NR=5% (n=2)

6. To what extent would you recommend this text for students in next year's course?

-3: 5% (n=2) -2: 16% (n=6) -1: 3% (n=1) 0: 29% (n=11) +1: 34% (n=13) +2: 8% (n=3) +3: NR=5% (n=2)

Part II. Agree or disagree with each of the following statements by checking the number that most closely matches your opinion according to this scale:

-3 = strongly disagree -2 = disagree -1 = slightly disagree 0 = neutral +1 = slightly agree +2 = agree +3 = strongly agree

1. The overall length of this text was appropriate: there was just enough material.

-3: -2: -1: 26% (n=10) 0: 29% (n=7) +1: 29% (n=11) +2: 21% (n=8) +3: 3% (n=1) NR=3% (n=1)

2. The cost of this text (¥2000 + tax) was fair.

-3: 18% (n=7) -2: 13% (n=5) -1: 24% (n=9) 0: 16% (n=6) +1: 11% (n=4) +2: 5% (n=2) +3: 3% (n=1) NR=11% (n=4)

3. The illustrations in this text were clear and helpful.

-3: 3% (n=1) -2: 8% (n=3) -1: 33% (n=12) 0: 21% (n=8) +1: 11% (n=7) +2: 11% (n=4) +3: 5% (n=2) NR=3% (n=1)

4. This difficulty level of this text was just right for me.

-3: 3% (n=1) -2: 8% (n=3) -1: 18% (n=7) 0: 32% (n=12) +1: 16% (n=6) +2: 14% (n=5) +3: 3% (n=1) NR=8% (n=3)

5. My interest in overseas travel has changed as a result of this text.

-3: -2: 5% (n=2) -1: 8% (n=3) 0: 21% (n=8) +1: 42% (n=16) +2: 11% (n=4) +3: 8% (n=3) NR=5% (n=2)

**Part III.**

1. Which of the chapters in this text were most helpful for you? (check a maximum of 3)

Unit 1 - Getting Ready (n=5) Unit 2 - Choosing a Country (n=5) Unit 3 - About Your Country (n=8) Unit 4 - Presentation 1 (n=1)
 Unit 5 - Wildlife (n=9) Unit 6 - Information for Visitors (n=9) Unit 7 - Presentation 2 (n=9) Unit 8 - Presentation 2 (n=2)
 Unit 9 - Getting There (n=7) Unit 10 - Exploring Regions (n=6) Unit 11 - Traveling Around the Country (n=10)
 Unit 12 - Presentation 3 (n=5) Unit 13 - Final Itinerary (n=9) Unit 14 - Presentation 4 (n=7)

2. Which of the chapters in this text were least helpful for you? (check a maximum of 3)

Unit 1 - Getting Ready (n=7) Unit 2 - Choosing a Country (n=8) Unit 3 - About Your Country (n=5) Unit 4 - Presentation 1 (n=6)
 Unit 5 - Wildlife (n=10) Unit 6 - Information for Visitors (n=6) Unit 7 - Presentation 2 (n=2) Unit 8 - Presentation 2 (n=9)
 Unit 9 - Getting There (n=5) Unit 10 - Exploring Regions (n=6) Unit 11 - Traveling Around the Country (n=3)
 Unit 12 - Presentation 3 (n=2) Unit 13 - Final Itinerary (n=2) Unit 14 - Presentation 4 (n=3)

3. Which of the following parts of each chapter were most helpful for you? (check a maximum of 3)

Key Vocabulary (n=27) Preview (n=11) Are You Ready? (n=14) Infosearch (n=1) Quick Check (n=4)
 Bonus Activity (n=2) How We Evaluate Each Other (n=2) Travel Journey Workbook Activity (n=5) Other: ∅

4. Which of the following parts of each chapter were least helpful for you? (check a maximum of 3)

Key Vocabulary (n=1) Preview (n=61) Are You Ready? (n=2) Infosearch (n=3) Quick Check (n=10)
 Bonus Activity (n=12) How We Evaluate Each Other (n=3) Travel Journey Workbook Activity (n=3) Other: ∅

5. What were the most outstanding features of this text? (mention as many as you wish in English or Japanese)

The text was easy to read. 4 *The content was interesting.* 4
The text was entirely in English. 2 *I could work out a practical travel plan.* 2
There were lots of things to check outside the text, so my English improved. 1 *Learned words were soon actively applied.* 1 *No response:* 25

6. What were the main shortcomings of this text? (mention as many as you wish in English or Japanese)

Some parts of the text weren't used. 3 *There were some things I couldn't understand.* 3
The text was expensive. 2 *Talking about travel all the time was tedious.* 1
There was a mistake in the Key Vocabulary. 1 *The text was all English (no Japanese).* 1 *No response:* 27

Thanks for your feedback.

All comments will remain anonymous and will not influence your grades in any way.

Appendix C: Travel Abroad Project Teacher Evaluation Form

(Available online at <http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/7-1-ApC.pdf>)

Appendix D: Travel Abroad Project Semester Final Exams

(Available online at <http://jalt-sa.org/PDF/7-1-ApD.pdf>)