An Evaluation of *Passport to Work*

Harry Meyer

**Introduction**

This paper is a retrospective evaluation of the Business English coursebook *Passport to Work* (Buckingham and Whitney, 2002) and its accompanying materials. It will examine the appropriacy of *Passport to Work* as the chosen coursebook for a second year introductory Business English course at Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College.

**Working Context - The School, Students and Curriculum**

Maebashi Kyoai Gakuen College is a small four year college with an undergraduate student population of 904. Very few are “mature” students with most entering immediately after high school. The age range is between 18 and 66. Students entering the college have at least six years of previous English study with three years each at junior high school and high school.

**The Class**

Each class was 90 minutes long and met once a week. There were 28 classes for a total of 42 class hours. The class contained 19 second year students. No business prerequisite was required. Most of the students had little if any knowledge of business.

**Guidelines for Evaluation**

For the evaluation of *Passport to Work* this paper will principally rely on four guidelines as proposed by Cunningsworth (1995: 15-17).

**Guideline One**

Coursebooks should correspond to learners’ needs. They should match the aims and objectives of the language-learning program.

**Guideline Two**

Coursebooks should reflect the uses (present or future), which learners will make of the language. Select coursebooks which will help to equip students to use language effectively for their own purposes.
Guideline Three

Coursebooks should take account of students’ needs as learners and should facilitate their learning processes, without dogmatically imposing a rigid ‘method’.

Guideline Four

Coursebooks should have a clear role as a support for learning. Like teachers, they mediate between the target language and the learner.

These guidelines will be revisited at the end of this essay and comment will be made as to how well Passport to Work has met them.

The Role of the Coursebook

According to Cunningsworth (1995: 7), the coursebook should play a supportive, but not dominant role in the language course. Teaching methods and course content should be determined by the teacher, not the coursebook. Having said this, it is important to recognize that the coursebook package does play a significant role in how and what the teacher teaches. Passport to Work’s coursebook package contains a wealth of supplemental material that is well integrated and greatly compliments the course. The coursebook itself does not dominate the course, though the coursebook package does. This need not be a problem, so long as the coursebook package is well designed, as it is in this case.

Given that the syllabus specification from the English department at Kyoai was and still is flexible and evolving, the Passport to Work coursebook package seems a suitable selection.

ESP vs. EGP

Passport to Work is an introductory business coursebook and as such is an English for Specific Purposes, rather than English for General Purposes coursebook.

ESP vs. EGP Syllabus

Widdowson distinguishes ESP (English for Specific Purposes) from EGP (English for General Purposes), by contrasting “…them in terms of the place of aims in each type of course (Widdowson in White, 1988: 27).”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ESP specification of objectives</th>
<th>training: development of</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>equivalent to aims</td>
<td>restricted competence</td>
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</table>
There has been considerable debate over the value of training vs. education (White, 1988). Ellis (in White, 1988: 46) suggests that knowledge from Type A syllabuses – knowledge about the language, “its parts, rules and organization…is not available for ‘unplanned discourse (ibid.)’.” For English for General Purposes this is likely; however, the more specialized the discourse becomes, the more predictable the outcome. Using corpora, it is possible to make predictions of what some of the lexical items used in a given situation may be.

**Role of the Learner**

The education system in Japan, like many Asian countries is generally rote based (Bronner, S., 2000). Traditionally, students are viewed as empty vessels, which the teacher will pour his or her knowledge into (Sengupta S., 1998). Most students in Japan have been conditioned to be passive and accept the knowledge presented by the teacher (Doyon, P., 2000).

**Role of the Teacher**

In Asia, the teacher is generally seen as a font of knowledge, who presents material to the students to be memorized and regurgitated (Sengupta, S.: ibid). This contrasts sharply with current views in Western teaching circles, where the teacher is increasingly seen as a facilitator of learning selecting appropriate materials and tasks and creating an appropriate atmosphere (Lewis in Willis, J. & Willis, D., 1996: 15). The core methodology of Passport to Work is Presentation, Practice, Production (PPP), which is a culturally appropriate methodology, as it is teacher centered and provides the guidance Japanese students overwhelmingly prefer.

**Publisher’s and Author’s Claims**

The following excerpt is taken from the back cover of Passport to Work.

*Passport to Work* is a low-level speaking and listening course in American English. It has been written specifically for Japanese learners who need to use English in the workplace. It practices essential communicative language skills through a series of realistic situations in the
world of work.

*Passport to Work* follows four Japanese characters in a variety of common situations at work such as telephoning, dealing with problems and inquiries, meetings, arranging overseas travel, and socializing with foreign co-workers and visitors.

Regular review units and an end-of-course game allow students to revise language systematically. Each unit is supported by background notes in Japanese and English, which contain practical hints, cultural information, and lists of useful expressions. The notes can be used in the classroom or for home study. There is also a bilingual world list.

As well as this Student Book with Student Audio CD, the course comprises of a Workbook, a Teacher’s Guide with step-by-step instructions, photo-copiables, and tests, and a choice of class Cassette or Class Audio CD. The audio material features a variety of native American, Australian, British, and Japanese speakers.

According to Kilbey (2002: 4), the primary goal of the course is to teach communicative competence, with learners being able “to communicate in English to a reasonable degree of effectiveness in a variety of situations”, by the end of the course.

**Target audience**

According the OUP website (2007), the intended target audiences for the book are adults and senior high school students from false beginner and to pre-intermediate level. This shows that these groups are typically of “low level.”

**Layout**

*Passport to Work* follows a functional syllabus. It contains fifteen main units, and three review units. The review units provide an opportunity to recycle the previous five units. A board game at the end of the book provides an opportunity to review the book’s
contents in full. Background notes for each unit are also provided in English and Japanese. The notes are located at the back of the book, along with a bilingual world list.

**The Coursebook Package**

The coursebook package consists of a student’s book with a “Student’s CD”, a workbook, a Teacher’s book and a class cassette or CD.

**Methodology**

*Passport to Work* follows a presentation, practice, production (PPP) approach. This is a teacher centered approach broken into three stages. In the first (presentation) stage, the teacher models and contextualizes a target form. Once the students understand the form, the teacher moves on to the second (practice) stage, where students practice the presented target form under close teacher supervision. The third and final stage in the cycle is the production stage, where students are given an opportunity to produce language during some sort of exercise (i.e role play, task etc.). It should be noted that the language produced during this stage usually matches that of the target form(s) presented earlier in the cycle (Willis, 1990: 4). This has led to legitimate debate over how this approach can be integrated with a communicative approach or even how effective such an approach is likely to be given recent findings in second language acquisition (Willis and Willis, 1996).

**Unit Format**

The format of each main unit (non-review unit) is identical. There are five sections (see appendix). These sections correspond to different stages in the PPP cycle.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Stage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listening</td>
<td>presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look and Learn</td>
<td>presentation/practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>presentation/practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over to You</td>
<td>practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>production</td>
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**Listening**

Kilbey (2002: 4) claims that the listening activity section of the main units “involve learners in task-based activities”, such as reading multiple possible answers and selecting the correct answer by checking a box next to it, circling true or false, filling in the blanks, or correcting mistakes in sentences written in the book. These
“tasks” fail to meet the definition of what a task is. According to Jane Willis “tasks are always activities where the target language is used by the learner for a communicative purpose (goal) in order to achieve an outcome (Willis, 1996: 23).”

**Look and Learn**

The Look and Learn section provides the students with an opportunity to practice the target structures of the unit in a pair practice exercise. The language is transactional and is presented as a substitution drill in table form.

**Conversation**

The conversation section of each unit consists of a listening “task” (listening and gap fill) or a gap fill exercise followed by listening to check the answers.

**Over To You!**

This section is a substitution drill, where lexical items from a table are substituted into the gap fill exercise in the *Conversation* section and practiced in pairs.

**Activity**

The Activity section involves role-plays with prompts or role-play/information gaps. It is intended to be an opportunity for “freer practice (Kilbey, 2002: 5)”, the production phase of PPP.

The unit format follows a dual presentation/practice cycle, *Listening and Look and Learn*, followed by *Conversation* and *Over to You*. Material in the *Look and Learn* section is recycled in the *Conversation* section. The *Conversation* section is then expanded upon in the *Over to You* section. According to Kilbey (ibid.), the *Conversation* section “is the focal point of each unit.”

The *Activity* section (as the production stage of PPP) is less integral to the unit and allows for freer use of linguistic resources by the students; though, as noted earlier (Willis, 1990: 4), the language produced usually matches that which is presented in the unit.

**Review Units**

There are three review units in the Student Book – one after Unit 5, another after Unit 10, and the third after Unit 15. They contain speaking and listening tasks which review the material in the preceding five units. They also include practice in saying numbers and telephoning language.
Personalization

The text is heavily focused on situational role-play, in which students assume the role of business people in business situations. Opportunity for personalized expression is limited, though not completely absent. Unit 10 gives students a chance to discuss in a group their future plans for the next 10 years (Buckingham and Whitney, 2002: 29). In the third review unit students plan a party (Ibid: 45). The workbook also provides some personalized activities, such as asking students to write sequentially what they would do if they won a lottery (Macfarlane, M., 2002: 27) or writing five sentences about their lives (Ibid: 33).

Socio-cultural Perspective

Principal characters in the book are from Japan, The United States, Australia, Canada, Singapore, Taiwan, and Korea. Women are underrepresented with only four of the eleven main characters portrayed female. Ethnic groups portrayed are ethnically European or East Asian. The age of the characters appears to range from the mid-twenties to sixties. No disabled individuals are represented.

Visual Materials

Passport to Work contains cartoon illustrations rather than photographs. The illustrations are well done and integral to the unit, that is they provide context for the listening exercise at the beginning of each unit.

Supplementary Materials

Teacher’s Book

The Teacher’s Book contains lesson plans for each unit, ideas and advice on introducing the activities, photocopiable activities, optional activities, the student book tape script, three tests, and workbook answer key. The lesson plans can be useful for teachers who may lack time for formal lesson planning or for novice teachers, who may appreciate some guidance.

Workbook

While the authors maintain that this is primarily a speaking/listening course, opportunity for reading and writing is presented in a limited fashion through the workbook. The workbook provides useful recycling of material presented in the student
book through various exercises, such as: gap fill, word jumble, true/false, writing the answer to questions, writing the questions to answers, or composing e-mail messages.

Class and Student CDs
The sound quality of the dialogues is quite clear. This has the advantage of allowing students to get clear input, but adds to the in-authenticity of the dialogues. There are few sound effects and virtually no background noise.

The Syllabus
Passport to Work has a functional syllabus. Functional syllabuses are a product of the communicative language teaching movement of the nineteen seventies (Richards, 2001: 155). They are organized around communicative functions, such as: introductions, making requests, apologizing, or offering help. According to Richards (ibid.) “There are no clear criteria for selecting or grading functions.” The criteria used by OUP in designing the syllabus is unknown; however, some continuity can be observed. (See appendix).

Authenticity of Materials
The dialogues in Passport to Work sound scripted and unnatural. Speakers don’t interrupt each other or speak at the same time. Pauses are very short. There is no back-channelling, no ellipsis, and little vague language. The interlocutors speak at a moderate pace and very clearly.

Some researchers (Swan, 1985; Willis, 1996: 12) argue that the use of inauthentic materials is dangerous.

…students…exposed only to scripted material…will learn an impoverished version of the language, and will find it hard to come to terms with genuine discourse when they are exposed to it (Swan, 1985: 85).

However, given the level of the students, contrived discourse may be more pedagogically sound. This is a second year course and comprehensible input takes precedence over authenticity. Students still have two years to gain exposure to authentic language before they graduate.

The language found in the dialogues is as close to being culturally neutral as possible. Characters in the book are of different nationalities and communicate with each other either in a formal business setting or in an informal setting discussing mostly work related issues.
It is worth noting that many international business people are well aware that their choice of words is very important and adjust themselves accordingly, when conversing with non-native speakers. Carter (1998: 50), also points out that “…roughly 80 per cent of all spoken interaction in English is between non-native speakers, for example between a Turkish secretary and a Japanese supplier”.

Discussion
Taking the premise that Passport to Work is an accurate reflection of PPP, I will now discuss its relative merits.

Criticism of PPP.

The Production Stage and “Freer” Practice – What’s Its Value?
Willis (1990: 4) expresses doubts over the theoretical underpinnings of PPP. Theoretically the present and practice stages will supply students with the vocabulary they will need for the production stage. His concern is that rather than seizing the production stage as an opportunity to be communicative, students will use it as an opportunity to display the specific forms demonstrated to them in the first two stages.

…learners do not treat the third stage of the lesson as an opportunity for fluent communication. They regard it as an opportunity to display the target form (Willis, D. in Willis and Willis, 1996: 47).”

Another concern is that though the students may appear to have mastered the target form, they fail to use it communicatively in future situations (Ibid.). Though students in my class did primarily focus on the target language provided during the presentation and practice stage, they were free to employ any L2 linguistic resources they had to complete the activity and did so.

An Alternative to PPP – Task Based Learning
Many critics of PPP point to Task Based Learning (TBL) as a much more useful alternative to PPP. A task is “…a goal-oriented activity in which learners use language to achieve a real outcome. (J. Willis in Willis and Willis, 1996: 53)”. Willis and Willis consider it simpler, both cognitively and linguistically “to talk about the here and now than to create hypotheses which examine alternative views of the world! (Willis and Willis, nd: 6)”. The problem with the “here and now,” is that for an undergraduate
business course at a post-secondary institution, we are not talking about the here and now. We are talking about situations which may occur in the students’ future.

**Role Play**

Willis and Willis (Willis and Willis, nd.: 5; Willis, 1996: 54) are critical of role play that simulates language. They contend that role play, to be of value, must involve actual problem solving. Simply acting out a situation only simulates language use giving learners the opportunity to display, rather than use language.

Unfortunately, simulation of language use may be a necessity in this case, most of the time. At the college where these observations took place, students are students, they do not work at companies and do not have the opportunity to use the target language in authentic situations. College ESP students must simulate and use language for display, most of the time.

Although most of the language use in Passport to Work is of a simulated nature, there are opportunities for genuine language use. For example, in the third review unit, students work in groups and plan an office party. Though this is a simulation, students may use their imaginations to plan the party. After the students have finished their planning, they then talk about those plans with another group. They are free to use any language resources they have at this time. Unfortunately, activities such as this are rare in Passport to Work, and this is a weakness.

**Praise of PPP**

While the indiscriminate use of PPP may be harmful to students, PPP used in the proper context can be beneficial. Passport To Work uses PPP as part of a functional rather than structural syllabus. Attempts in the syllabus to isolate grammatical items and present them in a sequential manner are limited and are subordinate to the functions taught in each unit.

Institutions may use mixed approaches. At the college where these observations took place, some courses offered use a PPP approach, while others may be task based. If every language course followed a PPP approach, that would be problematic, but if the program employs an eclectic mix of approaches, then there may be a place for PPP especially at lower levels and for ESP courses.

Courses are not necessarily taught in isolation. They are part of a “program” and students that may face a PPP syllabus one year, may face a TBL syllabus the next year, giving the opportunity to recall linguistic items from the previous course (taught in PPP) and then use them in a creative manner.
PPP can be used to establish a lexical base that did not exist in the students’ minds before. That base can then be tapped into for use in a TBL course.

**Motivation**

An important consideration regarding motivation is the familiarity of the methodology used and its cultural appropriacy.

**Cultural Appropriacy of ELT Methodology in a Japanese Context**

The Japanese education system is heavily teacher centered, with most Japanese students expecting a great deal of supervision. Having worked in four junior high schools in Japan, I have witnessed how students are conditioned to not exercise a great deal of initiative and to wait for direction/permission from the teacher before taking action. Later, having taught at two tertiary institutions here, I see the results. My students expect to be given a great deal of direction.

Hofstede (1986), notes that Japanese have what he calls “strong uncertainty avoidance.” They “are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, and unpredictable (Ibid: 308).”

PPP methodology is very structured, fairly clear, and predictable. These attributes make PPP culturally desirable for Japan. White notes,

…that the wholesale export of metropolitan materials and methods may not be culturally appropriate because other education systems exist within quite different cultural, economic and political contexts than those which apply to western Europe or north America (White, 1988: 21).

**Student Assessment**

The PPP approach has the advantage of allowing for easier student assessment than TBL. Lessons have clear and tangible goals, making tests unambiguous. Assessment of adequate syllabus coverage is also unambiguous (Skehan in Willis and Willis, 1996: 17).

*Passport to Work*, allows for easy student assessment given that its objectives are clear and specific. This makes it quite attractive for the educational/institutional needs of this college. Students know what is required of them and this lessens their anxiety and lowers their affective filters.
Guidelines for Evaluation – Comment

This paper will now return to Cunningsworth’s four guidelines for evaluation.

Guideline One

*Coursebooks should correspond to learners’ needs. They should match the aims and objectives of the language-learning program.*

*Passport to Work* corresponds to the learners needs. It is a low-level introductory Business English coursebook, which provides a basic introductory Business English Lexis within a culturally acceptable approach. Given that the aims and objectives of the Business English program at this college are still being formulated, this coursebook package formed an acceptable choice.

Guideline Two

*Coursebooks should reflect the uses (present or future), which learners will make of the language. Select coursebooks which will help to equip students to use language effectively for their own purposes.*

*Passport to Work* reflects language that learners will likely make use of in future business environments, such as taking business phone calls and various other functions presented in the syllabus.

Guideline Three

*Coursebooks should take account of students’ needs as learners and should facilitate their learning processes, without dogmatically imposing a rigid ‘method’.*

*Passport to Work* both met and failed guideline three. The coursebook and package took account of the students’ needs as learners and facilitated their learning processes primarily through a rigid method (PPP), as this approach was culturally preferable to less structured methodologies.

Guideline Four

*Coursebooks should have a clear role as a support for learning. Like teachers, they mediate between the target language and the learner.*

*Passport to Work* had a clear role as a support for learning in this course. It did a good job of mediating between the target language and the learner. A bilingual word list at the back of the book provided for quick translation of key vocabulary and bilingual background notes and illustrations helped provide a schema for each unit. These measures greatly assisted in the mediation between the target language and the learner.
Passport to Work corresponds to the learner and institution’s needs. It equipped learners with language they were likely to use in the future. It took account of their needs as learners and facilitated their learning processes, and it had a clear role as a support for learning in this course; however, because of the imposition of what Cunningsworth in Guideline three calls ‘a dogmatically imposed rigid method,’ Passport to Work can only meet 3.5 out of the four guidelines.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that the choice of Passport to Work for the Business English 1 course at this college was appropriate. Despite its limitations (an over reliance on PPP and a lack of tasks), Passport to Work met 3.5 of Cunningham’s 4 guidelines. Passport to Work also had the advantage of having a methodology, which was culturally appropriate to Japan.

Though authenticity was lacking, this was necessary considering the level of the students, and acceptable given that the course is not stand alone, but part of a larger overall program. This latter point also justifies to some extent the use of PPP rather than TBL. This is a second year course and students still have 2 years to gain exposure to authentic language. At this point in the program considerations such as comprehensible input, affective filters, and schema building should be given priority. The resulting schema and increased self-confidence can be put to use in the latter years of the English program with courses employing a TBL approach.

References


(23 September 2007).


http://www.oupjapan.co.jp/store/oupjapan  
(15 June 2007).


Appendix

Section 1 (Units 1 to 5)

The first section of the syllabus appears to deal with the orientation of new employees.

Unit 1 – company organization, job titles.
Unit 2 – introducing people, job descriptions, department names.
Unit 3 – explaining office layout.
Unit 4 – giving instructions, saying telephone numbers.
Unit 5 – inviting, making arrangements to go to places of entertainment.

Section 2 (Units 6 to 10)

Section 2 deals primarily with modals (Units 6 to 9), which suggests some structural influence.

Unit 6 – talking about travel plans, making requests (with can).
Unit 7 - making requests/offers, apologies.
Unit 8 – talking about sales and saying large numbers (sales figures).
Unit 9 – taking telephone messages, checking information, telephone numbers.
Unit 10 – discussing (personal) future plans while socializing after work.

Unit 10 does not fit well with the previous 4 units and was likely placed here for reasons of convenience, as each section has 5 units. Unit 10 seems to lead into Unit 11, which deals with discussing (personal) educational background and work experience.

Section 3 (Units 11 to 15)

Unit 11 – talking about your education and work experience.
Unit 12 – dealing with inquiries, asking for confirmation while organizing a sales conference.
Unit 13 – predicting future sales, making comparisons, numbers (sales figures).
Unit 14 – asking for and giving travel advice, imperatives (you should…).
Unit 15 – talking about preferences for food and drink, offering congratulations, making a short speech.

Units 11 through 15 stand as mirror image complements of the previous units, for example:

Unit 11 – talking your education and work experience.
Unit 10 – discussing (personal) future plans while socializing after work.

Unit 12 – dealing with inquiries, asking for confirmation while organizing a sales conference.
Unit 9 – taking telephone messages, checking information, telephone numbers.

Unit 13 – predicting future sales, making comparisons, numbers (sales figures).
Unit 8 – talking about sales and saying large numbers (sales figures).

Unit 14 – asking for and giving travel advice, imperatives (you should…).
Unit 7 – making requests/offers, apologies.
Unit 6 – talking about travel plans, making requests (with can).

Unit 15 – talking about preferences for food, drink and entertainment at a pub, offering congratulations, making a short speech.
Unit 5 – inviting, making arrangements to go to places of entertainment.

This recycling is followed up with the third review section and the “Office Game,” which reviews the syllabus as a whole.
要旨

Passport to Workへの評価

マイヤー ハリー

本稿では、ビジネス英語教本の Passport to Work (Buckingham and Whitney 2002)とその付属教材を再考し、評価を試みる。教室環境、教本評価に関するガイドライン、出版社と著者の主張、ユニット構成、題材の信憑性、方法論、あるいは教本、学生、教員の役割などの各要因を踏まえたうえで、この教本が共愛学園前橋国際大学における２年生を対象とした入門レベルのビジネス英語講座の教本として、どのように適しているかを考察する。