

# A Study of English Grammar Books Used by Japanese Americans and Its Possible Implications for English Education in Japanese Schools

Akihiko Takeda

## **Introduction**

The 2nd generation of Japanese Americans spoke Japanese at home and used English in school. To acquire good English was a must for them to get a good job and better education. They entered primary school with other Americans and advanced to high school. As they were exposed to Japanese at home, their English was not good, compared to that of the native speakers of English around them. Being behind other students in English, they were mocked and despised so often as if they were behind in everything.

In such a language circumstance, how did they acquire good English? What did they do to learn it to the extent that they could use appropriate, correct and standard English? The writer believes that the English textbooks which they used in America will provide some suggestions with regard to our English teaching and learning in Japan. The aim of this paper is to make clear what they learned and to consider what grammatical items Japanese students should learn for better writing.

## **1. English Learning Experience of *Nisei***

*Nisei*, or the 2nd generation of Japanese Americans were born in America. Most of them grew up in the 1930s and 1940s. Kameko Yoshida, who was a *Nisei*, reported in her essay the following.

The first years the American boy goes to school he is taught correct usage and given no reason for it except that it is correct. The poor English he has acquired before entering school is drilled out of him. He is taught to say

“ isn’t ” instead of “ ain’t, ” “ have gone ” instead of “ have went ” and “ had written ” instead of “ had wrote. ” He is busy at the same time learning to spell the words he uses and gathering new words for his limited vocabulary.<sup>1</sup>

This shows that memorization of correct usage was instilled but they did not give rules of correct usages in primary school. She also says that if a pupil does not learn English properly, he will be influenced by the people who do not speak good English. It implies that a pupil has to acquaint himself with good English so that he is not influenced by the less educated English spoken around him.

If the eighth-grade pupil quits school to go to work, he is not mature enough to resist the influence of slang users and uneducated persons he meets in the street or shops where he runs errands or performs some other small jobs suited to his ability. He forgets to apply rules of grammar. His employer feels no responsibility for the boy’s speech; hence he drifts into the language of the street which is, as a rule, third-or fourth-rate English described as *vulgar* because it is incorrect and careless.<sup>2</sup>

To master English, systematic grammar teaching was necessary during high school days. It was not until they entered high school that people were taught rules of English language systematically.

## **2. English Grammar Taught at High School**

The second generation of Japanese Americans learned English grammar in high school. According to Piaget’s developmental stage, high school students are at the stage of formal operation. It is said that a child at this stage comes to be able to think abstractly. What items were taught in English grammar? *Warriner’s English Grammar and Composition*<sup>3</sup> tells what was taught and what was not taught in school.

This book was first published in 1951 by John E. Warriner. As he had taught English for thirty two years in junior and senior high school and in college, his

book must have been based on his long teaching experience. English grammar was taught to students to help them improve mainly in their writing skills in those days. Japanese Americans learned it with other Americans although they were behind others in English ability.

The English grammar textbook begins with parts of speech. It is almost the same as what Japanese people used to learn. However, following eight parts of speech, phrases and clauses are discussed in the latter half of the book. The way of introducing phrases and clauses is different from that of English grammar books published in Japan.

*A New English Grammar Self-Taught*<sup>4</sup> written by Sada Yamasaki is one of the well-known grammar books in Japan. It was first published in 1921 and has had the reputation of being a great book ever since its first publication. This book devotes only three pages to describe phrases and clauses. Details of phrases and clauses are taken up in eight parts of speech.

Comparison of the two books mentioned above reveals that although both books take up parts of speech, Warriner deals with them in a superficial way, whereas Yamasaki tells them and explains English sentence structures analytically.

Comparison of Contents	Table 1
Warrier's English Grammar	Yamasaki's English Grammar
Part One: Grammar	Introduction
1. The parts of Speech	1. Noun
2. The Parts of Sentence	2. Pronoun
3. The Phrase	3. Adjective
4. The Clause	4. Article
Part Two: Usage	5. Verb
5. Levels of Usage	6. Adverb
6. Agreement	7. Preposition
7. Correct Use of Pronouns	8. Conjunction

8. Correct Form and Use of Verbs

9. Interjection

9. Correct Use of Modifiers

10. Glossary of Usage

---

Another characteristic is that Warriner's book contains a ' glossary of usage, ' which Yamasaki's book does not. This may be because Japanese people were expected to be able to read English rather than to write it, on the other hand the American people's aim was to write correct, standard English. In chapter 10 of Warriner's book, special usages of important words are presented with the following notes; standard, nonstandard, formal, informal, acceptable, and better. For example, it describes the usage of ' because ' as follows.

**because** The use of *because* after *reason* is (" The reason is because... "is common in informal English, but it is generally avoided in formal writing. In a sentence beginning " the reason is..., " the clause following the verb is a noun clause used as a predicate nominative. A noun clause may begin with *that* but not with *because*, which usually introduces an adverb clause.

Acceptable The reason she refused to go was **that** [not because] she had no money.

Better She refused to go **because** she had no money.<sup>5</sup>

Japanese high school students know that ' because ' is a subordinate conjunction, but they are hardly aware of the usage of ' because ' like this. Future Japanese students have to learn such usages and increase their active vocabulary for better writing.

Part Three of Warriner's book is about sentence structure which a learner should pay attention to when he writes a composition. *Nisei* must have learned good English from this book in order to counteract mistakes which may have been caused by the interference of the Japanese they spoke at home. Take ' Parallel

Structure ' for instance. Japanese students tend to make mistakes like " Water-skiing no longer interests me as much to go scuba diving. " They write such a sentence, by thinking " ...*sukyuba-daibingu ni ikukoto hodo.* " This book gives us the rule that a ' gerund ' should be paired with a ' gerund. ' Another example is: " Pam did her math homework, and then her composition was written. " <sup>6</sup> Although each of two noun clauses is correct. The shift from active to passive voice is unnecessary. These things are only partly taught in composition classes in Japan but not grammatically explained. Nor are they given any exercises to familiarize themselves with such rules.

Warriner's English Grammar

Table 2

---

Part THREE: Composition: Sentence Structure

11. Sentence Completeness 12. Coordination and Subordination 13. Clear Reference 14. Placement of Modifiers 15. Parallel Structure 16. Unnecessary Shifts in Sentences 17. Sentence Conciseness 18. Sentence Combining and Revising 19. Effective Diction 20. Exercise in Sentence Revision

---

As Sweet (1964) says, there are two ways of dealing with language:(1) the synthetic, which starts from the sentence;(2) the analytic, which starts from the word. He explains that the synthetic method implies that the analysis of the language is not carried further than, at most, cutting it up into sentences, which are grasped and learned as wholes, instead of being separated into words, and put together like pieces of a mosaic.<sup>7</sup> The synthetic way is to teach English as a ' text ' To quote: it is ' any stretch of language which is held together cohesively through meaning. ' <sup>8</sup> As Table 3 shows, Warriner's book already focused on ' text ' in those days. However, Japanese teacher's concern was a sentence structure, but not a text.

Part Four is mainly about paragraph writing. It explains that a paragraph consists of a topic and details and that a paragraph can be classified into four types: the expository paragraph, the descriptive paragraph, the narrative paragraph, and the persuasive paragraph. Cohesion in the paragraph, the

importance of which was claimed by Widowson in language learning theory, was already explained in those days. How to write a research paper and a business letter is also described in this chapter. This chapter must have been very useful to *Nisei*, because *Issei* could not teach how to write letter writing or essay writing to their children.

Warriner's English Grammar	Table 3
<hr/>	
Part FOUR: Composition: Paragraphs and Longer Papers	
21. The Paragraph 22. Expository Writing 23. Making Writing Interesting	
24. Language and Logic 25. Exercises in Composition 26. The Research Paper	
27. The Business Letter	
<hr/>	

Note: Part FIVE, SIX, SEVEN, and EIGHT are omitted because of limited space.

Many Japanese Americans said that they felt ashamed of speaking English, however they did not talk about writing English. They must have had difficulty in writing because the proficiency of the former is closely related to the proficiency of the latter. High school must have been a place where they developed their writing ability.

#### 4. English Grammar Books for Non-Native Speakers

*English Grammar: A Self-Taught Course* was published for soldiers in the United States Armed Forces Institute in 1943. A copy of the book is preserved in the Japanese American National Museum in Los-Angeles. This proves that Japanese Americans used the book during World War . The following preface of this book is interesting to read.

You want to improve your English; that is why you have sent for this book. We want to help you. We want to help you write and speak clearly, so that other people will not misunderstand you. More than that, we want to help you avoid certain errors which other people don't like to hear or to see

written. You don't want to use "school marm's English," and we don't want you to. But you do want to use clear, straight he-man English which shows that you know your own language. That is the kind of grammar this book tries to teach you.<sup>9</sup>

This also shows that they learned English grammar so that they could use correct and proper English in their working situations. As shown in Table 4, the contents of this book consist of some parts of speech. They are not different from what Japanese students used to learn. At first, it teaches that a sentence consists of two parts: 'Subject and Verb.' Then, 'Agreement of Verbs with their Subjects' comes next. Pronouns 'occupy Chapters , , and . In Chapters and , 'Verbs' are taken up. The last Chapter is about 'Adjectives and Verbs.' Judging from the contents, this is a basic grammar book because it does not deal with advanced grammatical items. It can be judged that these advanced grammatical items are not necessarily important for our daily life. Rather, it tells us that correct and appropriate usage of basic words and structures are more important.

---

## Contents

## Table 4

---

### How to Get the Most Out of this Book

#### Pre-test

- . Sentences: Making Good Sense
- . Agreement of Verbs with their Subjects
- . Forms of Pronouns
- . More about Forms of Pronouns
- . More about Pronouns
- . Verbs
- . Special Verbs
- . Adjectives and Adverbs

#### Final Review Test

---

Compared to the English Grammar edited by Warriner, this book does not cover complex sentences with relative pronouns and subordinate conjunctions. Nor does it take up such advanced grammatical items as 'participle constructions,' 'relative adverbs' and 'present participles.' This book must have been used by non-native speakers of English. Like Japanese American soldiers in Unit 442, many non-native speakers of English worked in the Armed Forces. They would have had to acquire good English.

Another feature of this book is that some special verbs are taught by contrast. Also, adjectives and adverbs are contrasted as shown in Steps 4, 5, 7, and 8.

Sub-title of Contents Table 5

---

Special Verbs

- |                              |                                     |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Step 1 <i>Lie and Lay</i>    | Step 2 <i>Sit and Set</i>           |
| Step 3 <i>Leave and Let</i>  | Step 4 <i>Teach and Learn</i>       |
| Step 5 <i>Bring and Take</i> | Step 6 <i>Of, Have, and Ought</i> * |

Adjectives and Adverbs

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| Step 1 Adjectives                                    | Step 2 Adverbs                        |
| Step 3 Adjectives after Verbs of Being               |                                       |
| Step 4 Comparison of Adjectives and Adverbs          |                                       |
| Step 5 Real and Very, Good and Well                  |                                       |
| Step 6 Negatives                                     | Step 7 This and That, These and Those |
| Step 8 This Here, That There, Where At, Them Guys ** |                                       |

---

\* As the abbreviation of *have*, 've sounds like *of*, speakers copy the sound when they write a sentence in English. In Step 6 of Special Verbs, this book prescribes the rule that you should never write *of* when you mean *have*.

\*\* In some less sophisticated areas in the United States these usages may be heard.

Contrast is a well-known way of teaching foreign languages. Fries(1958) once claimed that all the significant matters of language are features of contrast and that new English items should be taught by contrast and in minimal pairs. He says



that learners could recognize the difference between the two by contrast.<sup>10</sup>

*Learning the English Language: A Book for Men and Women of All Countries* is also kept in the Japanese American National Museum in Los-Angeles. It was what was used by non-native speakers of English in America. The grammatical items in this book are compiled in a different way from those of grammar books used in Japanese schools. The way found in this book gives us some good ideas of how to teach linguistic items in English classes. Take 'when' for example. This book introduces 'when' as follows.

When do we put questions? We put questions when we have a need for knowledge.

When did I get it? I got it when I was at the bookstore.<sup>11</sup>

(The underlines are mine.)

By relating the interrogative 'when' to the conjunction 'when', it becomes easy to understand this subordinate conjunction 'when'. As the subordinate conjunction is difficult to understand for Japanese learners, this way of introducing 'when' is well worth consideration.

Another characteristic is that words concerning 'reason' are put together to teach them, as the following example shows.

We do not see because our eyes are shut.

They are shut, so we do not see.

Why we do not see? We do not see because they are shut.<sup>12</sup>

Also, three basic tenses are dealt with as a series of verb forms: so 'seem', 'seems', 'seemed', 'will seem' are taught at the same time; 'send', 'sent', 'will send', 'sending', and 'sends' are presented at a time. By presenting many forms of a verb in this way, students grasp basic tenses and acquire the verb forms of each tense. This way of introducing linguistic items appears many times. The

following deals with 'do', 'it' and 'there' at the same time, although each of them belongs to different parts of speech.

Mrs. Jones put the telephone book under the baby.

She put the telephone book under the baby.

She put it under the baby.

She put it there.

She did it.

Did Mrs. Jones put the telephone book under the baby?

She did.<sup>13</sup>

Krashen(1982) says that optimal input is not grammatically sequenced, grammatical items do not have to be taught in sequence.<sup>14</sup> So, they should be taught repeatedly in the way shown above.

Japanese learners learn basic grammatical items one by one. They do not learn them together. Take the 'tense' for instance, they learn the 'present tense' first, and the 'present progressive' and next comes the 'past tense' and the 'future tense.' After learning grammatical items respectively, this way of presenting them at the same time is worth adopting to familiarize learners with them.

## 5. Discussion

What are common in these three grammar books in America is that they were edited to help learners improve writing. On the whole, these books describe prescriptive grammar. They learned English grammar as a rule, saying 'This is not correct, and this is not proper.' When they were encouraged to use standard and better English in the working place in America, it must have been useful. *Nisei* also must have learned better English with such books.

Japanese students learned grammar in order to read English analytically. The sentence structure was a main concern and five sentence patterns were crammed during the first year of senior high school. A sentence was analyzed and reduced to words or phrases. Recently, however, the productive aspects of English have

come to be emphasized in Japanese society. The writer believes that these three books give us some good ideas for our future English teaching and learning.

**Notes:**

1. Joyce Hirohata and Paul. T. Hirohata (ed.), *Nisei Voices: Japanese American Students of the 1930s – Then & Now*, Warzalla, 2004, pp.120-130.
2. Hirohata, p.130.
3. John E. Warriner, *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition: Complete Course*, Harcourt brace Jovanovich, 1951.
4. Sada Yamasaki, *A new Grammar Self-taught*, Kenkyusha, 1967.
5. Warriner, p.175.
6. Warriner, p.246.
7. Henry Sweet, *The Practical Study of Languages*, Oxford University Press, 1964, pp.97-98. This is quoted by *The Teaching of English in Japan published by Eichosha*, p.223.
8. Susan Feez, *Text-based Syllabus Design*, New South Wales, national Center for English Language Teaching and Research, 2002, p.4.
9. A. I. Spangler, *English Grammar: A Self-Taught Course*, The Macmillan, 1943, p. .

Note that there are some inaccuracies in the quotations given. Nevertheless, I thought it best to leave the quotations as they were written.

10. Charles C. Fries, *On the Oral Approach*, ELEC, 1972.  
The above is what Fries claimed in his lecture in 1957.
11. *Learning the English Language: Book Three*, Houghton Mifflin, 1943, p.6.  
This is a textbook donated to the Japanese National Museum in Los-Angeles by a Japanese American.
12. *Learning the English Language: Book Three*, p.12.
13. *Learning the English Language: Book Three*, p.9.
14. Stephen D. Krashen, *Principles and Practice in Second language Acquisition*, Permagon, 1982, p.68.