

[論 文]

A Study of English Grammar Instruction in Japanese Schools: From the Standpoint of the Cognitive Domain

Akihiko Takeda

1. Present Condition of Students' Grammatical Competence

It was generally believed that memorization of grammatical items and words leads to the mastery of English. Around this belief, the grammar translation method has long been adopted in Japanese schools.

However, with the advent of the so-called international society and the global age, people have come to stress the need for oral competence. Consequently English grammar has come to be largely disregarded. The *Course of Study* published in 1999 emphasizes the need to develop communicative competence by giving examples of language use in context and examples of language functions. The grammar that underlies communicative competence is neglected. Only basic grammatical items are treated. It prescribes that some basic structures should be taught only to the extent that students understand them. It also warns that care should be given so that a teacher may not center on explaining grammar terms. It says that emphasis should be on the teaching of actual usage. This is indeed good but this trend is responsible for the deterioration of grammatical competence in FL learners. Hammerly (1985) describes the following.

The emphasis on communication of the Sociolinguistic Theory was long overdue in the language classroom. Unfortunately, as has often happened in the past, a good thing has been taken by many to its undesirable extreme: Many have adopted the position that "Communication" is all that matters and that structural control is unimportant and will be a natural outcome of communication in any case. However, a premature emphasis on communication produces far more errors than can be effectively corrected, so they are

soon “fossilized” as faulty internalized rules or linguistic habits. As a result, it seems many students graduate from communicative programs with the ability to fluently convey many of their ideas, yes, but in atrocious classroom “pidgins.” The fact that error-laden speech interferes with communication and offends native speakers doesn’t seem to bother communicationists very much.¹

As a result of neglecting grammar teaching, it is said that the grammatical competence of Japanese students has drastically decreased, even basic sentence structures have not been acquired. Recently many Japanese students go abroad to learn English, but their basic English grammar is so poor that it is questionable whether their intensive English course abroad is fruitful or not. Bridget Green (2004), an instructor of English working at Mukogawa Fort Wright Institute (MFWI), looks back on English grammar teaching in Japanese school as follows:

In the past, Intensive English Programs (IEPs) in the United States had always been able to count on their Japanese students having a minimal level of grammatical competence, before they arrived in the U.S. and were therefore able to focus on improving the productive communication skills of reading, writing, and especially listening and speaking. Indeed, grammar classes themselves might even have been considered unnecessary: Japanese learners had been so thoroughly prepared in grammar instruction in Japanese high schools and universities, which traditionally relied heavily on the grammar-translation method in language education. Recently, however, it has been noted that the level of grammatical competence of Japanese students has become rather unpredictable, with some students as well prepared as in the past, and others seemingly lacking more than a basic understanding of English grammar.²

This shows that student’s grammatical competence is polarized. The writer

believes that grammar knowledge plays a central part of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) because we are usually not exposed to English in daily life. Japanese students don't have enough English input. What is worse, they begin to learn after the critical age of language acquisition. In such language circumstances, all the students have to do is to understand English structures and internalize them to get a good mark in school or to pass the entrance examination of higher institutes, whether they are interested in grammar or not.

2. Importance of Grammar to EFL Learners

As Japanese students have to learn English with limited English input, grammar plays a very important role in learning English. English grammar underlies the four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Hammerly (1985) shows the importance of grammar in Figure 1. According to Hammerly, the phoneme is the starting point of learning English. Then grammar is the axis of English learning from the beginning to the end. Vocabulary surrounds the grammar. Linguistic competence is composed of these three mentioned above. Based on this linguistic competence, communicative competence can be formed and cultural competence will be developed.

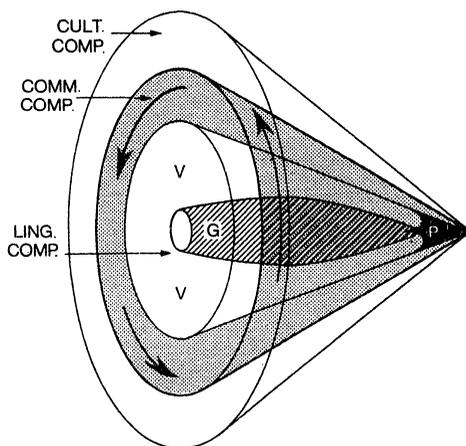


Figure 1³

3. Some Ideas for Teaching Grammatical Items from the Cognitive Domain

There are at least two aspects of teaching English grammar. One is to have students cram the core of English structure into their brains. Even though it is boring, it is very important to learn key sentence structures by heart. As Charles C. Fries advocated, the core of sentence structures that are fully mastered to the level of a habit will be developed into advanced English competence. We also have another way of teaching which comes from cognitive psychology. The following are some ideas on the introduction and the consolidation of grammatical items

3. 1. To let students notice the fundamental concept of new linguistic items

The *Course of Study* prescribes linguistic items which should be taught in school. The textbook authors write a textbook under the prescription of the *Course of Study*. An English teacher teaches linguistic items from a textbook. The teacher thinks it is important for the students to be familiar with such items because they are printed on the textbook page. The teacher explains the structure or the form and has students memorize such items. They try to memorize the new item without considering why it is needed or in what situation it should be used, etc. They do not understand the fundamental concept of those items at all. This may be one of the reasons why they say grammar is boring.

3. 1. 1. Participle Construction

Why is Participle Construction necessary to learn? When is it used? These are very simple questions that students ask when they are at the initial stage of learning English. To answer these two questions *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition* is very helpful. It gives suggestions for writing concrete sentences as follows.

Avoid wordiness by reducing clauses to phrases, and phrases to single words.

Clauses reduced to participle phrases

(1a) Clause When they were trapped by a cave-in, the miners

- waited for the rescue team.
- (1b) Participial Phrase Trapped by a cave-in, the miners waited for the rescue team.
- (2a) Clause Because we had found no one home, we left a note in the mailbox.
- (2b) Participial Phrase Having found no one home, we left a note in the mailbox.⁴

This shows that Participle Construction is used to avoid wordiness. The wordiness also creates some ambiguity. Take, Sentence (1b) for instance. This sentence means two things: Because they were trapped by a cave-in, ... and When they were trapped in by a cave-in,

However, only few Japanese students can understand this instruction. Then, how can a Japanese teacher teach them this fundamental concept of Participle Construction? One of the ways is to give the following Japanese sentence to explain it to students.

Sono shonen wa, tōri o aruite ite, taorete iru rojin o tamatama mitsuketa.

(Walking along the street, the boy happened to find an old man who had fallen down.)

The part “aruite ite” is very ambiguous in meaning. In Japanese it can be interpreted as follows.

Sono shonen wa tōri o aruite ita no de taorete iru rojin o tamatama mitsuketa.

(As the boy walked along the street, he happened to find an old man who had fallen down.)

Sono shonen wa tōri o aruite ita toki ni taorete iru rojin o tamatama mitsuketa.

(When the boy walked along the street, he happened to find an old man

who had fallen down.)

Giving the Japanese sentence and the English sentence at the same time is very helpful for the students to understand the fundamental concept. Japanese students will know that a compound sentence is wordy, but by reducing a clause to a phrase, we can write a concrete sentence. A teacher can add that Participle Construction is an advanced linguistic item which also conveys a very subtle meaning depending on the situation and that therefore it is not usually used in daily conversation.

3. 1. 2. *to*-Infinitive

Junior high students learn *to*-infinitive by applying Japanese words “*~suru koto*”, “*~suru beki*”, and “*~suru tame ni*”.

- (1) I like to take pictures.
- (2) I would like to have something to drink.
- (3) I will go to Spokane to learn English this year.

To give an additional explanation in Japanese is useful at the first stage so that learners can be familiar with the grammatical item. However, a teacher should inform them that *to*-infinitive has directional movement which leads to something in the future.

In Sentence (1), “to take a picture” implies the direction of “like”, which means the feeling of “like” toward “taking a picture.” In Sentence (2), “to drink” implies that I am going to drink from now. Sentence (3) shows psychological movement toward “learning English”. As these three sentences show, they have something in common. Those three imply directional movement and mean something will happen in the future. This fundamental concept will help learners to understand conventional usages of basic verbs, like “try to +v” and “try... ing”, “forget to +v” and “forget... ing”, etc.

3. 2. Put together what students learned so as to discover common grounds

Linguistic items of school grammar are fundamentally arranged according to eight Parts of Speech. Japanese students learn each item in bits and pieces in the category of eight parts of speech. Also, they learn the “Five Sentence Patterns”, which has long been considered to be the core of Japanese school grammar since Itsuki Hosoe introduced it in Japan in the *Taisho* Era. However, the problem is that each item is not linked together in the students’ minds. Therefore, a teacher should put together each item students learned at a certain stage of learning.

Ex. Subject-related words, phrases and clauses

Object-related words, phrases and clauses

Complement-related words, phrases and clauses

Modifiers- related words, phrases and clauses

By consolidating what was learned, a teacher can let students notice that there are some things that are common. Take the Verbals (infinitive, gerund, and participle) for instance. There are at least three rules among these Verbals.

- (1) The Verbal has a simple form and a perfect form. To indicate the tense of the Verbal before that of the main clause, the perfect form is used.

Ex. The rumor seems to be true. The rumor seems to have been true.

He was proud of passing the exam. He was proud of having passed the exam.

Being ill, I have to stay at home today. Having been ill, I have to stay at home today.

- (2) If the Verbal has a subject which is different from that of the main clause, the subject is put before the Verbal.

It is difficult to pass the exam. It is difficult for her to pass the exam.

I am sure of passing exam. I am sure of his passing the exam.

Walking along the street, the boy met an old man.

Night coming on, we left for home.

- (3) In a negative phrase, “not” goes before the Verbal.

We decided to go.

We decided not to go.

He blamed his son for doing what his wife said.

He blamed his son for not doing what his wife said.

Receiving an answer, I wrote him again.

Not receiving an answer, I wrote him again.

3. 3. To explain the term of grammatical items in Japanese

One of the reasons why grammar is so difficult is that a teacher does not give a clear explanation of grammatical terms. The teacher tends to use these terms without telling them what the term means. The teacher tends to just say, “This is a relative pronoun (*kankei-daimeishi*). This adverb (*fukushi*) modifies that verb. This is the subjunctive mood (*katei ho*). Then the teacher soon begins to drill students in English grammar without referring to the meaning of these terms.

It goes without saying that a teacher should speak English in class but extensive teaching experience tells us that sometimes Japanese explanations are also very effective to help Japanese students understand grammatical concepts.

Ex. 副詞 (adverb)

「副」とは「主なものに付きそって、その助けとなる」という意味で、社長を助けるのが副社長、会長に付きそって助ける仕事をするのが副会長の役目。英語で副詞はadverbと呼ぶ。ad はadd、つまりverbにつけ添える語という意味だから、副詞は基本的に動詞につけ添える語。

自動詞・他動詞 (Intransitive Verb / Transitive Verb)

自動詞は「自分で動く詞 (ことば)」。つまり、主語 (動作や状態を行う人や物) 自身の動作や状態を表す動詞。

他動詞は「他を動かす詞」。つまり、主語が何かに対して働きかける動作を表すことばで、働きかける対象になるものを「目的語」と呼ぶ。

3. 4. To imitate the explanation of native teachers of English

It is very difficult for Japanese teachers of English to give grammatical rules

and their concepts in English, but native speakers of English do that in class. Japanese teachers can imitate how they explain grammatical rules and the concepts in English. Such descriptions can be served as useful references.

Ex.

So, we will practice giving advice with “should.” We use “should” when we think that something is a good idea. We use “shouldn’t” when we think that something is a bad idea. Okay? And this is the structure of the sentence. Subject plus “should” plus base form of the verb. For example, “You should find a bigger apartment.” Or “You shouldn’t live on a noisy street.” When you need advice you need to ask for advice. Right? So you need to make a question. And when you make a question with “should,” This is the structure that you need to use. “Should” plus subject plus base form of the verb. So you’re making a question with “should.” Should I stay in the city or move to the country?” Okay it’s a question.⁵

3. 5. To make use of illustrations that are found in a book

Illustrations are sometimes helpful in understanding concepts. The visual image makes up for what is hard to explain in simple English. *English Grammar: A Self-Teaching Course* which is filled with illustrations is a good reference, though it is a very old grammar book published in the USA.

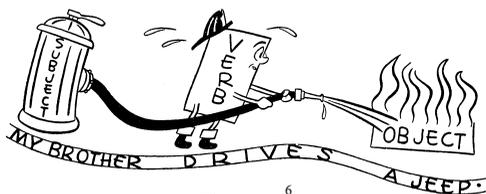


Figure 2⁶

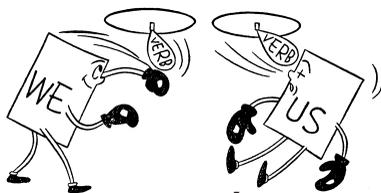


Figure 3⁷

3. 6. To have students notice common errors

There are some commonly-confused grammatical items because of the inferences Japanese students make. Teachers should know what grammatical items are problematic for Japanese students and why. There are some books that show which items are commonly confused in the discrete point test like a multiple choice test and a test of error correction, but when it comes to using these items in writing and speaking, Japanese learners do not pay any attention to them. This may be because they use Japanese in their minds when they have to write and speak English. This shows that English use is different from learning English grammar as knowledge. We have to have them notice their weak points in writing and speaking. Noticing is important. The following are examples of errors that were found in Japanese senior high school students' essays.

Examples of commonly-confused errors

Interference

I would often play it with my grandmother before I enter school.

(I would often play it with my grandmother before I entered school.)

Swimming coach was always puzzling.

(The swimming coach was always puzzled.)

Over generalization

I keep to have the hobby in the future.

(I will continue the hobby in the future.)

Reduction

What I am good at __ *shorinji kenpo*.

(What I am good at is *shorinji kenpo*.)

4. Conclusion

Grammar teaching has so far been done through rote-memorization and pattern practice. These methods are mainly based on behavioristic psychology. They have made a great contribution to English teaching in Japanese schools. However, we can not deny that such a way of teaching grammar is boring to

Japanese students.

There is another way of teaching grammatical items from the standpoint of the cognitive domain. Although we can not teach all the items from this standpoint, it is very effective to arouse students' interest in English itself, especially advanced students.

Notes:

1. Hector Hammerly, *An Integrated Theory of Language Teaching and Its Practical Consequences*, Washington, Second Language Publications, 1985, p.19.
2. Bridget Green, 'A Framework for Teaching Grammar to Japanese Learners in an IEP', *Link Project 2004: Survey Report*, MWU & MFWI Link Project Group, 2005, p.20.
3. Hector Hammerly, p.20.
4. John E. Warriner, *Warriner's English Grammar and Composition: Complete Course*, Harcourt brace Javanovich, 1951.
5. Marsha Krakower, *Terebi de Ryugaku* 10, 2006, p.12.
6. A.I. Spranger, *English Grammar: A Self-teaching Course*, The Macmillan, 1943, p.48.
7. Spranger, p.51.