

## **A Possible Role for Grammar Books in the Classroom**

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### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 English grammar teaching in Japan**

In 1980, when I was a high school student, I went to the U.S.A. as a foreign exchange student. In Japan I had been one of the best students in English class and usually received almost full marks in grammar tests. However, when I arrived in the U.S.A., I could not understand what my host family or my new friends said nor express my opinions or feelings properly. I had been taught the article system, passive voice and tenses, but I realized that I did not know when and how to use appropriately the grammatical forms such as “the” or “a”, passive voice or active voice, and perfect tenses or past tenses. I understood what I had been studying in Japan was something different from real language competence. In 1992, I became an English teacher and was surprised to realize that English teachers were still teaching the language in the same way I had been taught.

English teachers in Japan like to spend a great deal of time in teaching grammar. I often hear them say, “We must teach grammar. Students do not know grammar!” When they say that students do not know grammar, it means students do not acquire high marks in grammar tests or sentences they make are full of errors. It seems that some teachers consider that learning a language means studying grammar. It is considered in Japan that in order to make it possible for students to pass entrance examinations for university as well as to obtain English competence it is necessary to teach detailed grammar.

#### **1.2 Possible roles of grammar books in classrooms**

Some second language learning theories cast doubt on the teachability of grammar, arguing that learning does not become acquisition (Krashen, 1982; Prabhu, 1987), or that the learner’s syllabus imposes constraints on what can be taught at a given time (Krashen, 1982; Corder, 1967). Considering my experience in the U.S.A., these theories might have some validity. However, since it is a fact that in most of the English classrooms in Japanese high schools, grammar has actually been taught through the use of grammar books, there must be reasons for it. By examining the aims of grammar teaching as well as the results in Japanese schools, advantages and disadvantages of grammar books may become clear. By retaining the good points and improving inferior points of grammar books, their possible roles in classrooms may be clarified.

#### **1.3 The aim of this study**

This paper first looks at the theories which doubt the teachability of grammar and inspects their foundations. Then it reflects on the present English grammar teaching in Japanese high school. It considers Japanese students' purposes of English learning, and how grammar is taught. Further, it carefully observes the roles of grammar books in Japanese classrooms. Finally it suggests some possible ways to improve grammar teaching in Japan, proposing approaches to teach grammar rules along with lexicon in meaningful contexts.

## **2. Doubt on the teachability of grammar**

Some second language learning theories cast doubt on the teachability of grammar. If their theories are persuasive, it may be necessary for Japanese teachers to reconsider the method they use to teach grammar. Actually, at my high school English teachers teach grammar using grammar books which involve explicit teaching.

### **2.1 What is grammar?**

Before discussing the teachability of grammar, it may be appropriate to clarify what is meant by the word "grammar". In general, grammar is defined as "a description of the structure of a language and the way in which linguistic units such as words and phrases are combined to produce sentences in the language. It usually takes into account the meanings and functions these sentences have in the overall system of the language" (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992, p.161).

Grammar can be described from various points of view. For instance, Tonkyn perceives grammar as "descriptive – the stuff of reference grammars and linguistic theory – or pedagogical – the stuff of lessons and textbooks". He considers that "beyond both of these lies the learner/user's own psycholinguistic grammar" (1994, p.1). Batstone sees grammar from a productive perspective and a process perspective. The former is the way we look at grammar as a formal framework, which helps us to see language as structured and systematic. The latter is the viewpoint of grammar as a dynamic system, which "language users exploit as they navigate their way through discourse and make their developing meanings more precise" (1994, p.224).

### **2.2 Learning and acquisition of language systems**

Some theories which claim that it is impossible to teach grammar depend on the foundation that learning does not become acquisition. According to Krashen (1982), learners have two language systems. One is the result of conscious learning and the other, of unconscious acquisition. He states that knowledge cannot pass from one system to the other, and separately housed in the mind.

Prabhu (1987) considers that grammar construction by the learner is an unconscious process. Learners will acquire the formal system of a target language more effectively if they focus on the negotiation of meaning and not on the formal system. He considers that the internal grammar used

by a skillful learner must be much more complicated than any pedagogical grammar and that it is unlikely that we can teach learners grammar which they can adopt as the basis for their language competence. Further, he suggests that a descriptive grammar is actually likely to inhibit acquisition because there is no correspondence between the descriptive grammar and the learner's internal system.

It appears that Krashen and Prabhu cannot confirm that what they say is correct, and that we also cannot prove they are wrong. However, I have seen in my school many learners learn the target language. For example, I can refer to four third grade students in my high school, who belong to the "ESS (English speaking society)" club which I am in charge of. When they joined the club two years ago, they could hardly speak English, and they could just connect words they knew. However, now they can speak more fluently with native speakers. I can see that somehow they have internalized the language system. Therefore, it seems that what Krashen and Prabhu said may be wrong.

### **2.3 Learners' syllabus**

Another basis on which some linguists rely to announce that we cannot teach grammar is that learners have their own syllabus, which cannot be taught. Krashen (1982) states that grammatical structures are acquired in a predictable order, though learned structures are not stored in the same order. He considers that learners have their own syllabus. Also, Corder (1967) sees learning as a process of forming and testing hypotheses about the target language and the process of development as one which is determined by the learner and not by the teacher. He suggests that the learner has an inbuilt syllabus, a natural development process. Mager (cited in Corder, 1967) considers that an effective sequence is only one that is meaningful to the learner, and he criticizes the fact that the information sequence to be absorbed by the learner is traditionally dictated by the teacher. Brown (1994) and Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) view language learning as a process of creative construction. By a gradual process of trial and error testing, learners slowly succeed on establishing the system of rules.

It may be true that learning is an internal process and that we cannot teach grammar in the sense of explaining everything (Tonkyn, 1994). A learner's syllabus is complex, but we can merely teach one thing at a time. It seems that here lies a limitation of grammar teaching. However, rather than simply arguing for or against formal instruction, we should investigate the ways in which instruction is most likely to be of benefit.

### **3. Grammar teaching in Japan**

In each country and society, reasons for studying a second language are unique, and the conditions of learning the language, such as time constraints and daily exposure to the target language, differ. Therefore, if we inspect whether grammar teaching in Japan is effective, we should

investigate what the purposes of English learning in Japan are, and what Japanese students really need as English competence, and see if the grammar we teach is really helping them. From this point I would like to focus on grammar teaching in Japanese high schools, where I have information and experience, and where many students tend to spend a few hours every day, in studying English, including grammar.

### **3.1 Purposes of English learning in Japanese high schools**

#### **3.1.1 Entrance examination**

In April every year I ask my high school students the purposes of their language learning before I start a new course. More than three-fourths of students usually answer they are learning English to pass entrance examinations for university. The ratio may be 100% in some high schools. Though the rate may be a little lower in other high schools, it can be said that for many high school students the primary reason for learning English in high school is to pass entrance examinations. Teachers should not neglect this fact. If students want to acquire the language competence to pass the examinations, teachers must give examination success high priority (Willis, 1997).

#### **3.1.2 Abilities to use the language**

It is also true that students may want to acquire the ability to use the language in addition to the skills to pass the examinations. However, they consider that the two abilities are different, and that after working hard they may succeed in the examinations, but to obtain the ability to use the language naturally is not easy and maybe they cannot acquire the ability in high school. It generally takes a long time and intensive study to achieve native-like command of a foreign language (Lightbrown, 1985). In addition, the Ministry of Education syllabus has been forcing English teachers to apply the grammar translation method in classes, which makes it harder for students to build communicative competence, though the situation appears to be gradually changing.

Last year at the beginning of the third grade students' course, when I asked students their purposes of English learning, as I mentioned above, almost three-fourths answered it was to pass entrance examinations as expected. However, after a year, after they had passed the examinations, just before graduation, the same students answered that their purpose of future study of English in university or college was to become able to use the language or communicate with foreign people through the language. This result indicates that Japanese students are forced to learn the materials for examinations, which they may not want to, and that their real wish is to acquire communicative competence.

The following are the students' voices. Rie, who was one of the best English students, said that she would have preferred to spend more time building communicative competence at school than preparing for examinations, since she could study for examinations at home by herself. Kanami,

who hoped to become a dairy farmer, said that she would continue learning English after graduation and would like to become able to speak English because she was planning to study farming abroad. Yukiko, who majored in music, Yukari, in art, and Yuto, in economics, all said after graduation they would study English to be able to communicate in the language.

### **3.2 The present grammar teaching in Japanese high school**

What grammar are we teaching in this situation? Japanese high schools arrange their own school curriculum according to the Ministry of Education guidelines. The first grade students of my high school have five one-hour English lessons a week. They study “Reading” for three hours, “Oral Communication”, mainly listening in my school’s case, for one hour and “Grammar” for one hour. This curriculum differs a little from school to school. However, my school’s curriculum can be seen as a model for high schools which aim at entrance examinations.

Grammar is considered to be taught through all of the three kinds of lessons, directly and indirectly. In Reading and Oral Communication lessons grammar is expected to be learned indirectly. In Reading lessons, the main activities are to read and translate texts. In Oral Communication lessons, students are led to be exposed to natural English and to obtain the ability of listening comprehension.

In Grammar lessons, a grammar book Maintop English Grammar (Mizuno, 1993) which aims at obtaining explicit grammar knowledge is used. The contents of the book include explanations of structures such as verbs, tenses, passives, infinitives, -ing forms (gerunds, particles), conditionals, relatives, adjectives, adverbs, nouns, pronouns, prepositions, articles and conjunctions. They are accompanied by activities such as filling blanks, rewriting and Japanese–English translation. I sometimes refer to Murphy’s (1994) English Grammar in Use, which seems to be more straightforward in organization and concerned with simplicity in explanations than Maintop. We have only 35 hours a year to teach grammar. Therefore, these hours are considered to be the time to generally show the whole system of grammar, which students have learned partially and indirectly from Reading and Oral Communication lessons.

## **4. What role can grammar books have in Japanese classrooms?**

We have seen the purposes of high school students’ studying English and the grammar lessons they take. How has the grammar teaching been helping students in achieving their objectives? From here I would like to focus on possible roles of grammar books in Japanese high school. The advantages and disadvantages of teaching explicit knowledge of grammar are considered below, investigating examples of grammar books that are now used in my school. These ideas are based on my experience as a language learner and a teacher as well as several language theories.

#### **4.1 Give students opportunities to focus on form**

As we have seen, Krashen (1982) and Prabhu (1987) argue that if learners are given opportunities to communicate in the classroom, they will acquire the grammar naturally. However, there are several theories which emphasize the importance of focusing on forms. Ellis and Hedge (1993) suggest that a language program should include opportunities to use the language, but that it should also contain an element which enables learners to focus on grammatical forms. This component would draw learners' conscious attention to difficult grammatical features. Willis (1997) points out that though language performance will improve with exposure and with the chance to use meaningful language, formal instruction can make the natural acquisition process more effective. He considers that the lack of formal instruction may possibly lead to premature fossilization. Rutherford (1987) argues that exposure to meaningful input alone, although necessary, is not enough for learning grammar, and that for efficient learning students need to focus on language form.

What these theories suggest may support the use of grammar books in Japanese high school. For example, students spend four hours out of five in reading or listening to English, and one hour in learning grammar through grammar books, focusing on forms which they partly and sometimes unconsciously acquire in reading or listening lessons. For example, in my high school's Reading class, the first grade students will soon read a story about the history of ice cream in their textbook Polestar English Course (Ishiguro, 1997), and in the lesson passive voice will be introduced. However, there are only two sentences of the forms; "the earliest ices were eaten in China many years ago", and "ice cream was probably introduced to America in the early 1700's". These sentences are not sufficient to explain the system of passive voice, and here grammar books can be considered appropriate to supplement students' learning by focusing on forms.

#### **4.2 Give learners confidence and motivation**

Learning the grammar system gives some students confidence and motivation. In Japan other subjects, such as classical Japanese, mathematics and natural and social sciences are also taught systematically, therefore students may feel uneasy if they do not study the system, grammar, in some kind of logical order. By learning grammar they are satisfied to know roughly the outline of the language. Willis (1997) suggests that in some societies which respect the written word highly, many learners see explicit rules of grammar as a significant element of language learning. He mentions that he himself feels much happier if he can generalize what he has learned, though he believes that explicit knowledge plays a relatively small role in language learning.

Some students in my high school love to learn grammar. In my high school every student is given a self-study grammar book, which has explanation, questions and answers. Students are encouraged to study the book at home by themselves, and teachers conduct tests to check if they have studied. Through this some students became accustomed to such forms as passive voice, perfect

forms and infinitives. Students who receive high marks on the tests appear to gain confidence and develop motivation to study further, but at the same time they seem to have difficulties using the forms properly in appropriate situations. This is probably because to know the forms and to be able to use them are quite different.

### **4.3 Clarify differences between the native tongue and the second language**

It may be informative and even necessary to show the differences between the native tongue and the second language in formal lessons. A knowledge of the ways in which the two languages differ is advantageous “as an aid to identifying problem areas for the learner and as a vehicle for explanation, in giving learners feedback on their own speaking and writing” (Leech, 1994, p.21).

For example, in Japanese there is no article system. Therefore, it is certainly difficult for Japanese students to learn this system of English. Many students pay little attention to the system, and it takes a long time for them to understand that the article system is an essential component in the language and English speaking people exchange much information through the system. However, if teachers show that in Japanese postpositional particles carry some of the same kind of information (Willis, Shortall and Johns, 1997), for example, “ga” following nouns which appear for the first time and “wa” accompanying nouns which appear after the first time (Kindaichi, 1988), students can realize the significance of the article system more clearly.

There are many other items whose usage students usually have difficulties understanding, such as pronouns, perfect forms, progressive forms and passive voice (Ootsu, 1993). Also, Japanese is one of the rare languages which do not express a distinction between plurals and singulars of nouns, like Chinese, Korean, Thai and some other Southeast Asian languages (Kindaichi, 1988). However, it does not mean Japanese people do not mentally distinguish plurals and singulars. Actually, Japanese can express plurals by adding the suffix “tachi” to nouns; for example, a child is “kodomo” and children is “kodomotachi” (Kindaichi, 1988). Therefore, if grammar books can provide appropriate explanation by showing the differences, it may make it easier for students to understand the usage.

When we investigate the grammar book Maintop (see Appendix 1), which students of my high school use, we notice that there are some merits and limitations of using such a book. The book classifies nouns into two groups, countable nouns and uncountable nouns in explanation. Concrete nouns, collective nouns and abstract nouns are categorized into countable nouns and material nouns, abstract nouns and proper nouns are grouped into uncountable nouns. This categorization may help students to a certain extent understand the usage of plurals and singulars. However, the real problem Japanese students have lies in the fact that many words, such as food, time, emotion, summer and business, can be used as countable and uncountable, depending on the situation (Onishi and McVay, 1995). Regrettably, Maintop does not give any explanation to it. On the other hand, Murphy’s (1994) grammar book gives some examples of this distinction (see Appendix 2), which gives students

information concerning the usage. However, in order to become able to use countable nouns and uncountable nouns properly, we need to learn them in real contexts. For the usage differs depending on the situations, and it is impossible to know the situations only from isolated sentences in grammar books.

#### **4.4 Compensate for time constraints and prepare for entrance examinations**

Japanese high school students are busy preparing for entrance examinations and they have to be ready to take examinations in several subjects in three years. Though English examinations have been changing and simple grammar questions are decreasing little by little (Yamanoi, 1997), students still need to answer grammar problems as well as read materials precisely and quickly. When students answer these questions, it appears that they are analyzing the texts or sometimes decoding the messages. Students of my high school have only five or six hours of English classes per week, and it may be necessary and more efficient and quicker to teach grammar through explicit grammar books.

This situation has probably been a good excuse for many teachers in Japan to teach concocted sentences without a real context. Some English teachers consider themselves as excellent teachers only because their students pass examinations. Other deliberate teachers have noticed that the way they teach grammar without a context does not contribute very much to the acquisition of language competence, but they believe that this is the best way to prepare for examinations, and that to pass the examinations students must give up building up real language competence.

However, is studying grammar without a real context the only way to pass examinations? Do students have to choose only one of the alternatives, passing examinations or acquiring communicative competence? The answer appears to be “No”. Ryoko, Tomoko, Akane and Yasuko are third grade students who belong to my school’s English club, mentioned earlier. In the club with a Canadian teacher and me they conduct several activities such as discussing various topics, from cultural differences between Canada and Japan to their favorite movie stars, making traditional Japanese food and going on school trips together. Through these activities they have been trying to exchange information in English, though making mistakes. After two years, not only they have become more fluent and natural in English, but also they have come to gain the highest marks in English tests. They were the earliest four of their classmates who passed the pre-second grade English test conducted by the Ministry of Education. I interviewed Ryoko as to what contributed to her building up language competence. She answered that studying grammar might be necessary, but not sufficient, and discussing several topics, attending speech contests and singing her favorite English songs contributed most to her skills.

From the above fact, it can be said that passing examinations and building up communicative competence may be compatible. To achieve this aim, grammar book can supplement language

learning, which is supported by exposure to English and communicative usage.

## **5. Some possible ways to improve grammar teaching in Japan**

I mentioned above that grammar books have positive roles in the classrooms in Japan. However, it seems to be also true that it is not possible to acquire language competence only from grammar books.

### **5.1 Grammar learning in meaningful contexts**

In using grammar books, teachers can try to introduce to students the sentences of the same target form used in natural English, such as students' favourite English songs, movies and daily newspapers. Through this, students may focus on the form and, at the same time, may have meaningful input.

For example, when I focused on the form, "I wish I could", I referred to a song of Lisa Loeb, an American singer who is popular among Japanese young people. In her song there are phrases, "I'm going as far as I can go, away from you. I wish that I could belong here, with you, but that's not all that I'm about". In the context students could know easily that she wants to be with somebody, but she cannot, and they recognized that this was a situation in which people use the form, "I wish I could". Also, I introduced "Tears in Heaven", a song by Eric Clapton, who is famous among students that play music. In his song, there is a sentence, "would you know my name, if I saw you in heaven". After I explained he was singing about his lost son, students could realize this form was used in an imaginary or hypothetical situation.

### **5.2 Grammar and lexicon**

Grammar teaching may be considerably improved through teaching lexicon along with grammar. Willis (1993) suggests that "language learners are involved in the job of discovering the language. In carrying out this task they have to work simultaneously with the grammar and the lexicon" (p. 84). Sinclair (1991) also proposes that text is largely formed by the idiom principle, which is that "a language user has available to him or her a large number of semi-preconstructed phrases that constitute single choices, even though they might appear to be analysable into segments" (p. 110). Therefore, a skillful language teacher should be able to convey a sense of how grammar interacts with the lexicon as a communicative system (Leech, 1994).

From the knowledge of grammar alone, one may not produce language appropriately. For example, even after Japanese students learn there should be a distinction between singulars and plurals in English language, it is still confusing that they can say "I am looking for a job", but they cannot say "I am looking for a work". Or "it was a good suggestion" is correct, but "it was a good advice" is wrong. For Japanese students it is difficult to distinguish usages of "job" and "work", and

“suggestion” and “advice” unless they know the lexical items. Students also need to know idioms to use plurals and singulars properly. If students do not know the idiom “turn a blind eye to”, it is difficult for them to decide if they should say “governments cannot turn a blind eye to this problem” or “governments cannot turn blind eyes to this problem”. And if they do not know the idiom “get on my nerves”, it is confusing that “he gets on my nerves” is correct, but “he gets on my nerve” sounds strange.

A lexically-based approach to grammar seems to be more powerful than a structural approach. This is because words are more acceptable and recognisable to learners than structures, and grammar seems to be more complete if we deal carefully with words (Willis, 1993).

## **6. Conclusion**

At the outset of this paper, it was suggested that although some language theories cast doubt on the teachability of grammar, grammar books may play some effective roles in the classroom. Following the observations reported here, this idea seems to have some validity.

Given the several constraints of the Japanese situation, teaching explicit grammar has a specific role. Especially to prepare for entrance examinations, grammar teaching appears to be relatively effective. Grammar books have been offering students opportunities to focus on forms, giving them confidence and motivation, and showing them the differences between the native tongue and the second language.

However, it is also true that it is difficult to teach students useful grammar only through explicit teaching. Grammar books may help students succeed in examinations, but they alone are not sufficient to give them communicative competence. Even in the Japanese situation, passing examinations and building up communicative competence can be compatible. To achieve this objective, grammar teaching should be improved by showing grammar rules in real-life, authentic situations along with lexicon and also by giving students opportunities to use the forms in real contexts. Grammar contributes to meaning and should be taught in meaningful contexts.

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**Appendix 1 Extracts from Maintop English Grammar (Mizuno, 1993, p. 72)**

**Chapter 36 Nouns**

- 1) Countable Nouns – There is a distinction between singulars and plurals.
  - A) Concrete Nouns – Names that represent objects that have concrete shapes.
    1. A white dove is on the roof.
    2. White doves are pretty birds.
  - B) Collective Nouns – Names that present a group of plural people, animal or things.
    1. His family is very large. (Treated as a group)
    2. His family are early risers. (Members of a family are considered)  
Other examples: audience, class, committee, crowd, etc
    3. The police are after the thief. (Always treated as plurals)
    4. There is little furniture in this room (Always treated as singulars)  
Other examples: baggage, machinery, etc.
- 2) Uncountable Nouns – There are no plurals in principle.
  - A) Material Nouns – Names of materials that do not have fixed shapes, such as liquid and air.
    1. Butter is made from milk.
    2. There is some water in the bottle.
    3. Would you like a cup of coffee?
  - B) Abstract Nouns – Names that refer to qualities, actions, states.
    1. Knowledge is power.
    2. There is some truth in it.
    3. My teacher gave me a piece of advice.
  - C) Proper Nouns – Names of a particular person, place, country or thing.
    1. Jimmy came to Japan on Monday, July 7, 1987.

**Appendix 2 Extracts from Murphy's English Grammar in Use (1994, p.138)**

**Unit 69 Countable nouns and uncountable nouns (2)**

- A. Many nouns can be used as countable or uncountable nouns, usually with a difference in meaning. Compare:

Countable

1. Did you hear a noise just now?  
(= a particular noise)
2. I bought a paper to read.  
(= a newspaper)
3. There's a hair in my soup!  
(= one single hair)
4. You can stay with us. There is a spare room.  
(= a room in a house)

Uncountable

1. I can't hear. There's too much noise.  
(= not "too many noises")
2. I need some paper to write on.  
(= material for writing on)
3. You've got very long hair. ("not hairs")  
(= all the hair on your head)
4. You can't sit here. There isn't room.  
(= space)

- B. Coffee/tea/beer/juice etc. (drinks) are normally uncountable:

I don't drink coffee very often.

But they can be countable when you are thinking of a cup/a glass etc. So you can say:

(in a restaurant) Two coffees and an orange juice, please.

- C. Travel (noun) means "travelling in general". You cannot say "a travel" to mean a journey or a trip:

We had a very good journey. (not "a good travel")

Compare these countable nouns and uncountable nouns:

Countable

1. I'm looking for a job.

2. What a beautiful view!
3. It's a nice day today.
4. We had a lot of bags and cases.
5. These chairs are mine.
6. It was a good suggestion.

Uncountable

1. I'm looking for work. (not "a work")
2. What beautiful scenery!
3. It's nice weather today.
4. We had a lot of luggage. (not "luggages")
5. This furniture is mine.
6. It was good advice.