

# The role of grammar-centered textbooks in Japanese senior high school English classes

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Some theories of second language learning cast doubt on the 'teachability' of grammar, arguing that learning does not become acquisition, or that the learner's syllabus imposes constraints on what can be taught and learned at a given time. In spite of this, course books which aim at explicit teaching of grammar rules and structures continue to be popular. What role, if any, do you think such books have in the classroom?

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## 1. Introduction

With the rise of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the idea that grammar should be “banished,” advocated by influential scholars such as Krashen (Shortall 2006a:9) became popular. Yet then, as is still the case now, grammar-translation as a teaching methodology remains very popular in many parts of the world (Shortall 2006a:24, Derewianka 2001:245) despite the fact that its characteristics, “grammatical explanations, discussion of rules, rote practice” (Brown 2000:234) have been derided as “Neanderthal” (Long 1998:136, quoted in Brown 2000:234). It continues to be the method of choice despite frequent criticism, and resists change toward communicative, meaning-based syllabi.

Grammar-translation, or *yakudoku* as it is known in Japan, forms the basis of the syllabus and textbooks used in secondary education. Unfortunately, Japanese scores on the TOEFL test between 2000-01 were ranked 75<sup>th</sup> out of 88 countries worldwide (Takasuka 2003 cited in Porcaro 2004:82). English I and English II, required courses in Japanese senior high schools, have as their goal the teaching of the four skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) (MEXT 2002:2). As TOEFL measures performance in the latter of the three skills, there is clearly a problem with the status quo in secondary education. What should be done with the textbooks of these classes, which continue to teach grammar?

This paper will examine the following in my teaching context of English I and English II courses in Japanese senior high schools :

- The SLA research consensus on how grammar is acquired, and the role of textbooks in the classroom.
- The important needs filled by textbooks in the Japanese context
- How *yakudoku* based texts might best be used in the classroom.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Grammar Translation**

Shortall neatly defines grammar translation as a teaching methodology in which “grammar teaching is always explicit, the rules are available to the learners, and the textbook is organized around a list of structures” (2006a:24). Grammar translation developed as a means of studying “Latin and other ‘dead’ languages” (Shortall 2006a:23) and was more concerned with studying the language itself rather than actually using it for communicative purposes (Derewianka 2001:246). Among its goals were a “broad humane understanding of life” (Derewianka 2001:246) and “acquiring mental discipline” (CLAIR 2005:88). Characteristically, in the classroom grammar translation involves the translation of sentences in isolation from the L2 to the students’ L1 and if any oral practice is involved, it is limited to choral reading of texts to improve students’ pronunciation (see Shortall 2006a:23-4, Derewianka 2001:246, and CLAIR 2005:88-90).

It has been criticized as a pedagogical grammar for failing “to reflect how language is actually used in real-world communication” (Shortall 2006a:11), and that its “rules of usage tend to reflect preferences for fossilized forms of a previous era” (Derewianka 2001:247). This poses a problem in a course such as English I or English II in Japan, where speaking and listening are stated goals (MEXT 2002:2). In fact, although it focuses on written text, and is credited with making it “comprehensible” (CLAIR 2005:88) to learners, it does not aim to teach writing (Derewianka 2001:246), limiting it to only one of the four skills.

Despite its flaws, grammar translation is the most popular way of teaching EFL across the world (Shortall 2006a:24, Derewianka 2001:245). Because of its long tradition as the methodology of choice, teachers and students are familiar with its terminology (Derewianka 2001:247). Because it focuses only on the reading of texts, and instruction can be given in the students’ L1, teachers do not have to be proficient in the L2. Because of large class sizes, a reality in tertiary, secondary, and primary education (what Holliday (1994) calls ‘TESEP’) in many countries worldwide, the use of a teacher-centered methodology which uses L1 also keeps classrooms manageable. It is the methodology upon which most textbooks are based, and which many English examinations claim to be based on (See section 3.2. for further discussion). For these reasons, it has resisted change to the meaning-centered instruction advocated by CLT.

**Table 1: Summary of the Characteristics of grammar-translation**

Grammar instruction	Focus on forms, deductive, rules based
Purpose of study	Mental rigor, increased cultural knowledge
Focus	Reading and translation at the sentence level
Benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Teachers with little L2 proficiency can teach it</li> <li>● It meets student expectations</li> </ul>
Drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● It doesn't recognize English as a dynamic language</li> <li>● It neglects spoken communication</li> </ul>

## 2.2. Effectiveness of Focus on Forms

Long and Robinson (1998:15-18) classify grammar translation as a *synthetic* approach, meaning that the L2 is presented item by item, in a linear fashion. They use the term “*focus on forms*” to describe what goes on in the classroom when students are asked to acquire pieces of the L2 one at a time and then reproduce them for communication. In traditional applications of the synthetic approach, it is assumed that learners will acquire each form if they are taught it and given enough controlled practice. The materials used in the classroom exist only to highlight certain forms, and are not useful outside this context.

Stephen Krashen was “very much against grammar teaching” (Shortall 2006a:8). In response to “growing dissatisfaction” with synthetic teaching methodologies, he proposed his Monitor Model (Krashen 1982, paraphrased in Lightbown and Spada 1999:36-7). One hypothesis that he proposed was the *acquisition-learning hypothesis*,

which defines a difference between being able to use a grammatical form when communicating, and knowing the rules involved. His next hypothesis, the *monitor hypothesis*, states that a speaker can only use the learned system when he or she has enough time to think about language before producing utterances, meaning it cannot be used spontaneously. In his *natural order hypothesis* he proposed that language features are acquired in predictable sequences, but that rules which are easiest to state, such as the third person –s ending on verbs, are not necessarily the easiest to acquire.

A number of others, who do not necessarily accept Krashen's theories, have also criticized a linear model of language acquisition. Long and Robinson (1998:17) cite a number of studies that show learners passing through stages of "nontargetlike use" of forms, and temporary deterioration in accuracy. Non-linear progression was described by Larry Selinker (1972, cited in Lightbown and Spada 1999:80) as *interlanguage*.

Nunan (2001:192) describes interlanguage in the following way:

Rather than being isolated bricks, the various elements of language interact with, and are affected by, other elements to which they are closely related in a functional sense. This interrelationship accounts for the fact that a learner's mastery of a particular language item is unstable, appearing to increase and decrease at different times during the learning process.

Because of the widespread acceptance of and evidence for this model, as Skehan (1996:18) states, "the belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization ... no longer carries much credibility."

### 2.3. Materials in the Classroom

Textbooks have come under criticism for their inauthentic language (Shortall 2006b:2) or for failing to meet learner needs (Allwright 1982, O'Neill 1982:105). O'Neill (1982) describes the 1980s as a time when materials were out of fashion. Allwright (1982:7-8), for example, warned not to expect much from textbooks, because they cannot determine learners' goals, or the content of a course. Instead of *teaching* materials, he suggests *learning* materials such as collections of ideas for role-plays, or learner training manuals (Allwright 1982:14-5). Swan (1992, cited in Hutchinson and Torres 1994:315) goes further in criticizing textbooks, saying:

The danger with ready-made textbooks is that they can seem to absolve teachers of responsibility. Instead of participating in the day-to-day decisions that have to be made about what to teach and how to teach it, it is easy to just sit back and operate the system, secure in the belief that the wise and virtuous people who produced the textbook knew what was good for us. Unfortunately this is rarely the case.

The reality is, however, that textbooks survived despite the criticisms and are even more highly structured now than before (Hutchinson and Torres 1994:316). O'Neill (1982) says that while materials might not perfectly match a specific group, there is something in them that any group can use. The target language, after all, is in the end the same. In addition to this, they save the teacher money and time that home-produced materials would cost. They also give students the opportunity to review what was learned, and to



look ahead. He agrees with Allwright that they cannot be everything, but says that they provide an important framework.

In their study, Hutchinson and Torres (1994) challenge the anti-textbook argument and show that textbooks are considered important by teachers. Management was the reason given by nearly 75% of teachers, and the use of a textbook was said to save time, and make teaching easier and higher in quality. Their study also shows that the textbook is important for learners as well. They describe the stress inherent in learning a language, and explain that the textbook provides a structure that reduces the stress.

### **3. My Context**

In my own teaching situation, where I am an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT), the problem of working with a grammar translation textbook is complicated. Among the stated reasons for the JET program and ALTs in the public school system is the hope that it will help introduce CLT methodologies (CLAIR 2005:92). This section will look at grammar translation based textbooks I use in the classroom and their role in my teaching context.

#### **3.1. Two Grammar-translation Textbooks**

In Japan, high school English I and English II textbooks are chosen at the local level from books approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (abbreviated hereafter as MEXT) (MEXT 2002:6). The approved

books are similar; they are based on the grammar-translation method, and are based on reading. As an ALT, I have no part in selecting which of the texts are used in my classes.

Unicorn I and World Trek English II are popular textbooks for English I and II respectively, and ones used in classes that I teach. In Appendices 1 and 2, I have provided a sample of the table of contents for 2 lessons, as well as a detailed breakdown of the activities in their first chapters.

A look at the table of contents for both textbooks shows the number of bullet points for reading and conversation sections to be the same in each unit. The detailed breakdown of the units, however, reveals that the conversations are a page or less, and not as well integrated as the reading, grammar, and vocabulary sections. The main parts of the units in both books are long reading passages. Vocabulary drills before the main text are designed to prepare students to read it, and questions that come after the text test for understanding, usually at the sentence level and the answers are usually found in the text. There are dialogs in the chapters, which teach formulaic conversation, but sometimes encourage continued practice. However, they are rarely used in class for this purpose in my experience, and do not appear on the final exams.

The teacher's manuals (Ichikawa et al. 2002b, Ojima 2004) encourage isolation of words and structures for explanation in L1 by the teachers. Detailed instructions of how to explain grammatical forms and lexical items are given in L1, so teachers will not be at a loss if asked questions by students. In Unicorn 1, the teacher's manual promotes its Over to You questions (Ichikawa et al. 2002b:10), which ask students for their opinions

about the contents of the reading section. This section is described as a departure from previous methods of teaching, but the manual also reassures the teachers that the questions have been made simple enough not to interrupt the reading of the main text.

In light of the research consensus (See section 2), the pedagogic value of these texts in the classroom is limited. However, they must also be looked at in terms of the needs (real or perceived) that they fulfill for the classroom participants, which will be shown in the next two sections.

### **3.2. The Entrance Examination**

Perhaps the biggest justification for grammar-translation textbooks in Japan is the entrance examination system (Hino, 1988; Yukawa, 1994; Gorsuch, 1998 cited by Guest 2000). Teachers are conscious of the necessity to teach their students what they need to know to pass the examinations to enter a university. They feel that this is responsible for their dual identities, the “two pairs of shoes” (Sakui 2004:158) that they wear when hoping to implement communicative methodologies, but in actuality using grammar translation in the classroom.

However, despite the frequency of this claim, it has been challenged by Mulvey (1999, quoted in Porcaro 2004:81) and Guest (2000). Guest first defines grammar as Swan does (1995, quoted in Guest 2000), as the combining of words, or lexis. He claims the grammar being taught in Japanese classrooms, as presented in textbooks, are *rules of syntax*, and don't represent the whole range of grammar.

Both Mulvey and Guest point to the fact that on entrance examinations, the majority of questions can not be solved using a single grammatical rule. Guest analyzed the *Daigaku Nyushi "Center" Shiken* (The "Center" test) whose importance he describes:

This is the general examination that almost all university entrance candidates take before taking specific university entrance exams. It is the exam that high school teachers most often focus upon when claiming to be preparing students for university entrance exams. In fact, booklets of previous Center tests are widely used in high school classes for university track students, believing that this year's center exam will likely resemble those of the previous few years.

Of the questions on the test, only 15% fall into the *rules of syntax* category which English I and II textbooks teach. The questions on reading sections of the tests, which Guest calls their "centerpiece," require understanding the entire text, not only details at the sentence level and are near native in their complexity. More than just rules of syntax, the tests measure "analytical skills, advanced lexical, structural recognition skills, and an ability to negotiate meaning." He argues that the actual translation of sentences, exercises which are popular in supplementary materials that teachers use in class, do not appear in significant frequency on the tests, and cannot be used as a justification for their use.

### 3.3. The Needs They Fulfill

Aside from pedagogical concerns and entrance examinations, there are important needs that the grammar translation textbooks fill in my classrooms. Both English I and English II classes are taught 4 hours a week by the Japanese Teacher of English (JTE), but team teaching with an ALT is done at most for only one of those hours (sometimes much less frequently). The JTE is responsible for creating the syllabus. The JTE must deal with institutional factors, such as expectations of student behavior in all of their classes. As Holliday warns, active question-asking may not be appreciated by other teachers at the school (Holliday 1994). The design of the classroom, and the size of the classes, up to a maximum of 40 students, make management a primary concern for the JTE, which teacher-fronted, L1 instruction typical of grammar translation provides. In addition, there is the very real concern that the teachers (and students) have personal lives, which cannot be sacrificed to make materials exactly suited to the needs of every individual (Hutchinson and Torres 1994:320). Sakui, in her study, (2004:160) found that JTE's are only able to spend 50-60% of their working hours on teaching and planning lessons, with the rest of their time dominated by meetings and duties not related to instruction.

The MEXT cites the introduction of CLT methodologies as one reason for the use of ALT team-teaching (CLAIR 2005:92). They recommend that ALTs and JLTs work together to produce their own materials, to encourage communication not possible through the use of grammar-translation texts, (MEXT 2002:17) but Sakui (2004) reports

that teachers have difficulty finding time to plan team-taught lessons with full-time ALTs. and this problem is compounded in my situation as a part time ALT.

A larger concern than the time it takes to produce such materials is that they are seen by the students as optional, because they do not appear on the class' tests, which are based on the grammar-translation syllabus. The danger in using once-off teacher made materials is that despite teacher intentions, the students will gain less from them than lessons centered around the textbook because they do not actually participate in the tasks. There are too many students for the teachers to monitor in pair or group work, or to give individual feedback to. Ultimately, unless the JTE integrates such communicative activities into their tests, the students gain the most from team taught lessons when they focus on the grammar-translation textbook. They are seen by the students as more worthwhile, they fit into the same pattern of their non-team-taught classes and cause less stress brought on by facing the unknown, and re-enforce patterns and vocabulary that they will be tested on in class. Pedagogically, regardless of classroom methodology, my learners will benefit more from lessons that they participate in than from those that they do not. The textbooks' crucial management role cannot be ignored.

#### **4. Using the Text in Class**

Limited in the ways that I can influence the JTEs' syllabus by my position, I will speculate in this section on how I would like to see grammar translation textbooks used in class, not only in team teaching but also by the JTEs on their own. If the current

textbooks are adapted successfully by them, especially if the results are borne out in entrance examinations and standardized tests as the TOEFL, change in the way texts are written becomes possible.

#### **4.1. Communicating with Text**

As Holliday (1994) suggests in his paper about TESEP countries, teaching which aims to negotiate meaning is possible. However, it must be adapted to the context and is achievable by interacting with a textbook that teachers and students are familiar with. Even though the text aims to teach grammar, it also gives the students something to talk *about*; the contents of the central reading sections. Holliday proposes that it is acceptable for the students to use L1 when talking with each other, so long as they are producing something in the L2 in either written or spoken form. This is a marked improvement over implementing “once-off” communicative lessons with teacher made materials because the students can see participation in lessons as necessary preparation for the class’s final exams. This allows for a focus on meaning in the classroom while taking management concerns of the context into account.

One possible way of implementing communication with the textbook is to use the questions that ask for students’ opinions about what they read. When used in teacher-fronted instruction orally, students are reluctant to answer because they fear making mistakes, they don’t have adequate vocabulary, or because they don’t have time to fully understand the text. Turning such questions into a writing activity or presentations would improve their effectiveness, as students would have chances to use their

dictionaries, ask each other for help, and otherwise compose their answers before delivering them. This would give them more confidence in their answers, which would be evaluated in terms of their meaning and not use of singled-out grammatical patterns.

An example of application is the “Over to You” question in Unicorn I: (Ichikawa 2002a:9) “Name one big problem in the world now.” The teacher’s manual (Ichikawa 2002b:46) suggests short answers such as “global warming / terrorism / globalism / a population explosion”, but there’s no reason this can’t be expanded and made into a presentation or written assignment that focuses on meaning.

#### **4.2. A Focus on Form**

While focus on *forms* intends to teach specific structures (see section 2.2), focus on *form* can draw from whatever forms come up in the course of a lesson (Long and Robinson 1998:21-6). It is possible for forms other than those pointed out in the grammar exercises section or by the teacher’s manual to be focused on in the classroom.

If students are producing something in written form, or making presentations about the text as suggested in the previous section, this would be an opportunity to address forms that students have consistent trouble with. According to Guest’s (2000) analysis that the university entrance exams require a more holistic approach to grammar (see section 3.2), this approach would give opportunities for a wider variety of grammar instruction. Also, students are already familiar with terms such as noun, verb, relative pronoun, etc. when discussing language, so no additional learner training would be necessary, easing the



transition. Tests in the classroom could focus on the highlighted structures to see if the students are improving, maintaining the notion of accountability textbooks provide (Hutchinson and Torres 1994).

Simple grammatical forms that grammar translation assumes have already been mastered by the students can be re-enforced. Even such “simple” forms as the third person –s on verbs appear abundantly in reading passages, and can form the basis of an activity. For example, students could be shown examples from the text of how the third person –s is used, and then asked to make (in groups perhaps) worksheets for the other students in C-R style, asking them to discover the rule. If combined with the approach outlined in the previous section, consistent student errors could be the ones isolated for use in activities.

## 5. Conclusion

**Table 2: Conclusions – The Role of the Grammar translation Textbook in Class**

Area of interest	Conclusion
Classroom management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The students are familiar with them, and they provide structure, reducing the stress involved in the learning process.</li> <li>● They give the students clear classroom goals</li> </ul>
Entrance Examinations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The grammar and reading comprehension drills in the textbooks do not adequately prepare students for typical examinations any more.</li> </ul>
Adaptation / Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Grammar translation texts can be adapted to focus on meaning through presentations or writing exercises based on their content.</li> <li>● They can be used to focus on <i>form</i>, rather than focus on <i>forms</i>, providing more holistic grammar instruction.</li> </ul>

Although I feel that the grammar translation textbooks I use in my English I and English II classes are of limited pedagogical value when used as instructed by their teacher's manuals, they serve an organizational and institutional purpose as they are valued by the community at large and help to define what is being studied for the teacher and the students. It is impossible to exclude these textbooks from the classroom, given the selection process involved, but adapting them so the students can interact with them for the purposes of genuine communication is possible.

Ultimately, it is not the ALTs who are best positioned to change the methodology of the Japanese classroom, but the JTEs. Individual JTEs who are attempting to implement changes toward meaning based instruction and focus on form in their classrooms are ultimately the ones who will sow the seeds of change. In doing so, they will make

change in the way textbooks are produced possible. Until that happens, the grammar translation textbooks of the present will serve as the starting point for that change.

**APPENDIX 1: UNICORN ENGLISH COURSE I SAMPLE**

The table of contents for chapters 1-2 (out of 10 total) (Ichikawa et al. 2002a:2-3)		
1	Time for a New Dream	Grammar point: 5 basic sentence patterns, Present continuous
		Communicative activity: Comparing two things
2	Children: Mirror of the World	Grammar point: Passive voice, Present perfect
		Communicative activity: Expressing worry

Breakdown of Chapter 1 (Ichikawa et al. 2002a:4-13)		
Pages	Activity name	Description
4-5	Before you read	Preview of lexical items relevant to the reading section topic.
6-10	Reading section	A pronunciation key in IPA is given at the bottom of the page for words that appear in the text, and below that are lexical sets with either an example of use (8/11) or translation (3/11). Reading questions are also at the

		bottom, asking questions that can be answered directly from the text.
11	Language focus	Teaching of grammar items from the main text. The teaching is explicit, terms such as S+V+C are used, and brief L1 explanations are sometimes given.
12 (½ page)	Communication activities	It is laid out in a pattern practice format (according to the teacher's manual). It has a grammatical objective.
12-13	Developing your skills	One fill in the blanks exercise, one sentence re-arranging, another fill in the blanks, and then a translation activity.
13 (½ page)	Express yourself	Students give their own answers to 4 questions in writing, or orally

**APPENDIX 2: WORLD TREK ENGLISH COURSE II SAMPLE**

Table of contents for chapters 1-2 (out of 11 total) (Asaha et al. 2003:2-3)		
1	The Bright Eyes of Cambodian Children	Grammar point: Present and past perfect tenses, conjunctions, relative clauses
		Conversation: Giving advice
		Information: Cambodia
		Dialog: Asking for directions
2	Interview about Life in Space	Grammar point: Dummy subject “it”, emphasis, distjuncts (i.e. “unfortunately,”)
		Conversation: Reacting to news
		Information: 2001: a Space Odyssey
		Writing for Fun: This is my Treasure

Breakdown of Chapter 1 (Asaha et al. 2003:4-15)		
Page(s)	Activity name	Description
4-5	Starting out / Vocabulary Preview/ Converstaiion	Preview of lexical items used in the reading section.
6-11	Reading section	Key lexical items are translated at the bottom of the text, and IPA pronunciation guides are provided under that for many other words.  Opposite each reading page is a comprehension

		check, a grammar point with examples and diagrams to explain, as well as some practice.
12	Language Review	Drills with the previously presented grammar points, 2/3 of which involve translation.
13	Communication Practice	Pattern practice drills, with model answers provided. Also, there is also a picture with three questions, which students discuss, and write answers to.
14	Cambodia	Information about famous places in the country, and history. Presented in L1.
15	World Trek Dialog 1	a model dialog, a key expression (lexical), substitution practice, and “other useful expressions” (lexical).

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