

Grammar as Lesson Content

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レッスン内容としての文法

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Abstract: This paper presents findings from an observation of a Japanese junior high school English class conducted in February 2013. The primary focus of this observation was to consider grammar as lesson content and to examine the pedagogical approaches employed in this class in relation to recent literature on grammar instruction and classroom management.

Key words: grammar, lesson content, grammar instruction, classroom management

1. Literature Review

Junior high school and high school English classes in Japan have long placed a great deal of emphasis on grammar, which despite calls for a “zero grammar” approach as noted by Ellis (2005), is a vital part of English language learning. Grammar, described along with vocabulary as a basic unit of language (Richards, 2001), is necessary for linguistic communication and gives learners a tangible means through which to express thoughts and ideas (Ellis, 2006; Widodo, 2006).

Researchers such as Hato (2005) note that an “overemphasis placed on grammatical knowledge” (p. 36) has contributed historically to a lack of communicative ability in English among Japanese students, though the Japanese government has made efforts to rectify this problem (Hato, 2005; Monbukagakusho, 1999; Sakui, 2007). While it was over a decade ago that Nunan (1999) noted the lack of sense in teaching grammar without a discourse perspective, Celce-Murcia (2007) reports seeing many textbooks that present grammar mechanically and non-contextually on display at a somewhat recent TESOL conference.

The very fact that recent literature has called for the use of discourse and context in presenting grammar (Celce-Murcia, 2007; Chung, 2005; Ellis, 2005; Widodo, 2006) suggests that even in our day, grammar is being taught “for grammar’s sake” rather than as a means to the goal of communicative proficiency. (There would be no need for a call for a discourse- or context-based approach to teaching grammar if such an approach were already frequently employed.) The idea that grammar is still being somewhat widely taught as a discrete element of the language is what prompted me to observe a Japanese junior-high school class from a grammar-as-lesson-content perspective.

2. Task Objective

I conducted an observation of a 45-minute first-year junior-high school English class taught by a Japanese teacher of English (JTE) in a rural town in northern Japan. Prior to the start of class, the JTE informed me that the basic theme of the lesson would be a review of the present and past tenses of the verb “to be,” used in affirmative and negative sentences as well as question forms.

My objective was to determine the extent of the role played by grammar in the lesson, specifically the manner of presentation of the various forms of the verb “to be.” In particular, I focused on whether the *deductive approach* or the *inductive approach* to teaching grammar was primarily employed. It has been said that the deductive approach to grammar is a “rule-driven” form of learning, while the inductive approach is a “rule-discovery” one (Widodo, 2006).

A deductive approach to learning and teaching grammar includes these characteristics:

- Learners are presented grammar rules, often explained in their L1 (Nunan & Lamb, 1996).
- Learners are given examples of sentences in English illustrating the grammar point being taught (Widodo, 2006).
- Once they understand the grammar point, learners are then asked to apply it discretely in example sentences they produce (Wajnryb, 1992).

The following elements often characterize an inductive approach to teaching and learning grammar:

- Learners are first given example sentences containing the grammar point in question (Widodo, 2006) – unlike in a deductive approach, where the grammar rule(s) in question are explained first.
- Learners are called upon to “notice” the grammar form(s) being taught (Ellis, 2005) rather than having these form(s) explicitly laid out for them.
- Learners are then encouraged to “experience” the grammar form(s) via their own language use, and in so doing, sort out the language rules involved (Wajnryb, 1992).

3. During the Lesson

3.1. Greeting and introductory task

The JTE entered the room and said “How are you?” in English to the class as a whole. After two or three students replied with “I’m fine,” the JTE then told the class to open their textbooks to a dialogue, for which the primary grammar point seemed to be the present progressive verb tense. The teacher read the dialogue line-by-line to the students, who repeated after him. The students then practiced reading the dialogue in pairs. At this point, the students did not know that a review of the verb “to be” would be the main grammar focus of the class.

It seemed that the main purpose of this introductory lesson step was for the JTE to get the students to practice reading aloud and to work on pronunciation, or perhaps simply to review language studied in a previous class. The present progressive tense was not modeled “away from the book” and the learners were not given the opportunity to practice this language form on their own. Also, because the introductory dialogue primarily dealt with the “-ing” ending of the present progressive form, an opportunity to employ an inductive approach to exhibiting the main grammar point of the lesson (basic uses of the verb “to be”) was lost.

3.2 The Main Grammar Point

The JTE next wrote the word “be” in English on the board, and in Japanese asked the students to say different forms of the verb aloud. One student said “am,” a second student said “is,” and a third said “are,” as the JTE wrote these three forms of “be” in a list on the board.

At this point the students seemed consciously active in considering the grammar they were being asked to produce (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 86). This activity placed the learners in the role of “responder” and the language they were expected to produce was extremely limited – specifically, their task here was limited to conjugating the present tense of “be” in a form-focused way, without any contextual reference at all (Ellis, 2006). While only three students actually spoke during this activity, the aim of it (at least presumably) was to get all the learners thinking about the grammar involved.

Next, the JTE explained in Japanese how the verb “be,” when conjugated in English, takes different forms for the first, second, and third persons as well as for singular and plural – in contrast to Japanese, where the present tense of “be” is always “*desu*” regardless of the subject of the sentence. The JTE followed this L1 explanation by asking the students to produce (via speaking) some basic sentences using each of the “be” forms. Four different students each produced a sentence: “I am Kentaro,” “This is a pen,” “You are a student,” and “Be quiet.” During this exercise, the learners were placed in a deductive-approach situation: After the JTE’s L1 explanation, the learners were asked to produce individual sentences in a discrete fashion that employed the grammar being studied in that day’s class.

The JTE then briefly explained in Japanese how a basic question is formed in English using “be.” His focus here was on the changing word order – that is, how “He is a doctor” becomes “Is he a doctor?” in question form by switching the positions of “he” and “is.” The JTE explained in Japanese how this grammar rule pertaining to questions differs greatly from Japanese, in which a sentence form (“*Kare-wa issha desu*” – “He is a doctor”) keeps the same word order and only adds the ending “-*ka*” to form a question (“*Kare-wa issha desu ka?*” – “Is he a doctor?”). The JTE called on four students to produce question forms for the sentences that the class had produced previously (i.e., “You are a student” became “Are you a student?”); he then conducted a listen-and-repeat activity, in which the class repeated these question forms after him.

Next, the JTE asked the class in Japanese if they remembered the past tense forms of “be.” One student offered “was” and another one produced “were,” and the JTE wrote both of these words on the blackboard. Following this was an L1 explanation of “was” and “were,” similar to the explanation in Japanese given earlier for the present tense forms of “be;” the JTE explained when “was” is used (with “he” or “she,” for example) and when “were” is used (for instance, with “you” or “we”). The students were not given the opportunity to produce sentences using “was” or “were” via speaking, as they had been earlier in the class when reviewing the present tense forms of “be.”

All throughout these exercises, it can be said that the students were “doing something with the language” (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 86). However, the sentences and questions they were producing were discrete in nature; opportunities for the JTE to attach the grammar instruction to context and discourse (Celce-Murcia, 2007) and to employ a more communicative approach (Chung, 2005) were not taken. The learners could have practiced reading a prewritten dialogue in which a visitor to Japan (using “is” and “are” questions, as well as “What?” or “Who?”) is asking questions about pictures of Japanese places or people, while a Japanese person replies with sentences such as “That is Mt. Fuji” and “He is Ken Watanabe.” In that way, they could have seen the verb “be” in a more natural context. From there, they could have practiced a similar conversation as a role play, with the JTE providing pictures that the “role players” could use to conduct pair work – which, incidentally, was almost completely absent from the entire lesson.

3.3. Practice with the Main Grammar Point

The remaining class time (apart from the final few minutes, which were devoted to going over a test the class had taken the previous week) involved the students completing a written worksheet (see Appendix) that the JTE had produced. The worksheet contained 16 individual sentences. For 11 of the sentences, the students were asked to fill in a blank with the correct form of “be.” The students were asked to change two other sentences featuring affirmative forms of “be” into negative forms; the remaining three sentences were affirmative sentences that were to be changed into question forms. After the students had all completed their worksheets, the JTE handed out a copy of the answer key to each student. The students each checked their own answers individually.

Here again, learners were thinking about grammar and employing use of the language they had learned to some extent (Wajnryb, 1992, p. 86), but only discretely. In addition, Japanese translations appear to the right of all 16 sentences on the worksheet, which probably caused the students to think less about the grammar than they might have thought about it on an L2-only worksheet. For instance, item no. 11 on the worksheet would require “am” in the blank space, except that “last year” appears in the sentence. If there was no Japanese translation provided, the learners would need to activate their knowledge of the past tense of “am” and think about why “was” is the correct form – but because the

Japanese version of the sentence appeared on the worksheet in plain view, learners didn't need to consider "was" in a communicative context; they needed only address it from a "translation" mindset.

The findings described in this paper, of course, are limited to a single case study. Observations of other classes would shed more light on how often a deductive, translation-based, discrete-item grammar instruction approach – with a lack of grammar instruction in a communicative context, despite support for it in research – is still being employed in Japanese junior high school English classes.

4. Reflection

What role does "grammar as lesson content" play in my teaching? In short, I do not teach grammar "for grammar's sake," as was largely done during the class I observed. I see language as the means by which people communicate, and I see grammar as the set of forms and rules that "bind together" language; knowing what makes a language "tick" better enables people learning that language to use it. As Ellis (2006) does, I consider grammar to be one of the elements of language that learners need and use to complete communicative tasks.

When I first started teaching English, the training program at the conversation school where I was employed called teachers to introduce a specific grammar point, such as "future with 'going to,'" as a lesson theme. Later on, the school's approach changed; instead of "future with 'going to,'" the lesson objective was introduced as "talking about your future plans." The future tense was still a main element of the lesson content, but it became a means by which the lesson's objective was approached, as opposed to being the objective itself. I have maintained this approach to incorporating grammar as lesson content ever since.

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Appendix. Worksheet completed by students during observed Japanese junior high school class.

Grammar Reviewing ① b-e 動詞
7th Grader

No. _____ Name _____

◎ b-e 動詞には _____ (原形)
 was were (過去形)
 been (過去分詞) があります。

[Question 1] 次の _____ に適する be 動詞を答えなさい。] *use correct form of "be" (affirmative)*

(1) This <u>is</u> my brother Jim.	こちらは私の兄のジムです。
(2) We <u>are</u> from Vietnam.	私たちはベトナムの出身です。
(3) He _____ a baseball player.	彼は野球選手です。
(4) Who _____ that girl?	あの女の子は誰ですか。
(5) I <u>am</u> studying at the college.	私は大学で勉強しています。
(6) Ted and Nick _____ friends.	テッドとニックは友達です。
(7) _____ careful.	注意しなさい。
(8) Those _____ my computers.	あれらは私のコンピュータです。
(9) _____ they playing soccer now?	今、彼らはサッカーをしているの ですか。
(10) What _____ you doing?	あなたは何をしていますの ですか。
(11) I _____ a junior high school student last year.	去年、私は中学生でした。

Japanese translations of sentences

[Question 2] 次の英文を否定文 (打ち消しの文) にしなさい。] Change sentences
 また「 」内にその意味を答えなさい。 to negative "be"
 form.

(1) These are my pictures of flowers.

These aren't my pictures of flowers.

(2) It is a letter from England.

◎ b e 動詞のある文を否定文 (打ち消しの文) にするには、

_____とできる。

[Question 3] 次の英文を疑問文 (尋ねる文) にしなさい。] Change to question
 form.

(1) They are your DVDs.

Are they your DVDs?

(2) I am from Okinawa.

(3) Maki and Amanda are good friends.

Maki = マキ Amanda = アマンダ

◎ b e 動詞のある文を疑問文 (尋ねる文) にするには、

_____とできる。