A Practice in the Classroom: How to Let Japanese Learners of English Notice Differences in Construal between Japanese and English

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IMAI Takao
今井隆夫

1. Introduction
This paper centers on an exploratory research methodology based on teaching experiences in my classes. I will share with readers what I have been practicing in my classes for the past 15 years, especially for lower-intermediate, upper-intermediate, and advanced level Japanese learners of English. Most of the content in this paper is based on the oral presentation I gave at the annual CELES convention in Gifu on July 1, 2012.

I have been teaching college students who are at different English achievement levels and various majors at some universities. I also have been teaching adult learners who are enthusiastic to learn English conversation from the fall semester of the academic year 2002. In addition, I also had an opportunity to try my method out on junior high school students in the academic year 2009 and 2010. In those two academic years I taught 50-minute class session at a local junior high school in Toyota City. The class I taught was an “elective English class” for 3rd-year junior high school students and their academic records were 4 or 5 on a scale of 1 to 5. The comments given by the students after the classes showed that all the students seemed to find the content of the lessons useful and interesting. They also seem to have realized that the process of learning English is fun and interesting if the construal differences between native speakers of English and Japanese are focused on.

2. Theoretical Background
2.1. What we should bear in mind when learning English as a foreign language
In teaching or learning English as a foreign language in Japan, I believe it is inevitable that both teachers and learners of English should bear in mind the next five principles that I’ve been practicing in my classes.

1) English can’t always be translated into Japanese, and translation can even lead to misunderstanding or unfortunately make learners feel that English is difficult to learn.
2) Native speakers of English and Japanese construe (or interpret) things or situations in...
different ways. (The efficacy of this point is also emphasized by Littlemore (2009: 38)\(^3\)
3) One form for one meaning, and one meaning for one form\(^4\). (Bolinger, 1977: preface)
4) Language is dynamic. Any language expression is a reference point that requires the
listener to try to understand what the sender means. Inference, context, background
knowledge, cultural literacy, etc. are indispensable elements for the listener in order to
understand the sender’s meaning. (Compatible with Cognitive Linguistics)
5) Language is partially motivated, admitting that some parts are arbitrary. (Littlemore,
2009: 148)

The way I teach English in class is based on the five principles given above. I always try to help
learners realize how important these five concepts are in the context of EFL, that is, when learning
English as a foreign language as we do in Japan. I also try to motivate students to learn English
and help them feel the process of learning English is intriguing and fun by giving examples that
any one or more than one of these five concepts underlies. In the context of ESL, the process of
acquiring English seems to be more similar to native speakers of English because learners have
more opportunities to use English outside the classroom. In the context of EFL, however, since
learners do not have sufficient opportunity to use English outside the classroom, some kind of
explicit learning should be helpful. These five principles are important in this regard. In Section 3
of this article, I will elaborate on how I explain these concepts in class by giving examples. Since I
always focus on item 1, 2, and 3 in the first few class meetings, I’ll focus on these three principles
in this article, too.

2.2 What is Grammar? — In reference to the concepts of Cognitive Linguistics

Grammar is language knowledge that is dynamic. It includes different sizes and different
schematic levels of expressions, some of which are units (specific expressions) and others are
schemas (regularities induced or abstracted from units). Many pieces of expressions have been
stored in our brain through our pre-existing language experiences, and what you do in producing
utterances is to ‘cut and paste’ pieces of expressions that we need for the purpose of conveying our
meanings.

My definition of the grammar of a language is compatible with the ideas of Cognitive
Linguistic. (cf. Langacker: 2002: 264\(^5\), Tomasello: 2002: 10\(^6\)) I will be a little more specific about
this definition. The point I’d like to clarify is that grammar includes different sizes and different
schematic levels of expressions. Regarding different sizes, when you hear “grammar,” you may

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\(^3\) ... Form-focused instruction is nearly always more effective than mere exposure to L2 input (Doughty, 2003) but it is not always
clear what aspects of the language we should focus on in these form-focused instructions. ... learners are often primed by their
entrenched L1 construal patterns not to notice new L2 construals. Construal may thus be one area of second language learning where
learners benefit from explicit instruction. (Littlemore, 2009: 38)

\(^4\) This point is compatible with the concept of Cognitive Linguistics. Form-Meaning (Symbolic Structure)

\(^5\) The grammar of a language is defined as a structured inventory of conventional linguistic units. Specific expressions are included
in this inventory provided that they have the status of units – a reasonable assumption for dogs, trees, etc. Also included in the
grammar are schemas extracted to represent the commonality observed in specific expressions (both units and nonunits).
The coexistence in the grammar of the schema and instantiations affords the speaker alternate ways of accessing a complex but
regular expression with unit status: it can simply be activated directly, or else the speaker can employ the schema to compute it.
Moreover, the schema is available for the computation of novel instantiations (e.g. quagmires); if such an expression is frequently
employed, it may very well become established as a unit and thus be incorporated per se in the grammar. (Langacker, 2002: 264)

\(^6\) ... the child does not put together each of her utterances from scratch, morpheme by morpheme, but rather, she puts together her
utterances from a motley assortment of different kinds of pre-existing psycholinguistic units ... the question was how this child was
able to “cut and paste” together her previously mastered linguistic constructions in order to create a novel utterance in a specific
usage event. (Tomasello, 2002: 10)
think that it's a sentence level regularity that makes it possible for you to produce an infinite number of utterances. In Cognitive Linguistics, however, it is important to understand that if a form has some meaning, the symbolic relationship between the form and its meaning is regarded as grammar. Therefore, it means that grammar includes different sizes, such as suffix/prefix, words, phrases, and sentences. If you have come across such language expressions as runner, swimmer, employer, teacher, for example, you may induce a regularity that the form, 'verb + er,' generally means a person who carries out the action designated by the verb. In other words, there is a symbolic structure between the form (verb plus -er) and its meaning (that is, the person who carries out an action designated by the verb). The second point I'd like to be specific about here is the meaning of different schematicity. People generally induce schematic rules of grammar by experiencing many concrete sentences. It is probably true that most people will only regard the schematic rules as grammar rules. However, in Cognitive Linguistics, not only the schematic (abstract) rules of grammar, but also the utterances which you hear someone say in context (specific/concrete examples), are regarded as grammar knowledge. By way of clarification, consider the examples given below. Among these three expressions, (a) is the most specific, while (d) is the most schematic. However, regardless of their various schematicity, all of them are equally included as grammatical knowledge.

(a) How many computers do you have?
(b) How many Xs do you have?
(c) How many Xs do/does SV...?
(d) Wh-word + do/does SV...

When we produce an utterance, for example, How many cousins do you have?, or How many countries does the Nile run through?, we do not necessarily produce it by using only the most schematic rule such as (d). In producing the first example, we are more likely to use less schematic regularities as in (b). Just by changing computers into the word cousins, you can produce the sentence. Even when in producing the second example, we do not necessarily refer to only (c), but also to (b) or (c). In addition, when you have the exact expression you want to say in your remembered collections of language expressions, you can access or produce the exact expression without referring to the more schematic rules. This is also compatible with Langacker's idea. He claims that lower level schema is more important than super schema when you actually produce an utterance (Langacker 2002: 265). Furthermore, I consider that memorizing basic expressions or doing pattern practice in the classroom is compatible with the concepts of Cognitive Linguistics.

2.3 The importance of partially motivated aspects of language.

As I introduced at the end of section 2.2, Langacker claims that lower level schema is more likely to be employed when people produce utterances, while the main function of the high-level schema is categorization. Drawing on this idea of Langacker's, grammar rules that explain not all, but some of the usage events, are beneficial for learners of English. This point is also emphasized by Littlemore (2009: 148). The gist of the main points that she mentions is as follows:

a. ... some aspects of language are not arbitrary and that there are sometimes reasons why we say things the way we do.

b. ... teachers can explain, in theory, to their students why it is that certain expressions mean certain things, instead of simply telling them 'that's just the way it is' and expecting them to learn
expressions by heart.

c. This engages learners in a search for meaning, which is likely to involve deeper cognitive processing which, according to Craik and Lockhart (1982), leads to deeper learning and longer retention.

d. It is important to say at this point that although a great deal of language is thought to be motivated, the ways in which this happens are not entirely predictable, and different languages are motivated in different ways. Thus, much of the analysis of motivated language is necessarily retrospective rather than predictive.

(Highlighted by the author)

Based on these theoretical backgrounds, I believe two things are indispensable and effective when teaching or learning English as a foreign language.

1) To give learners as many specific language expressions as possible and help learners try to induce regularities (schemas) on their own.

2) To explain to learners why certain expressions mean certain things even though the regularity is only partially motivated.

To realize these two points in the classroom, I came to the conclusion that helping learners notice construal differences between Japanese and English can best be achieved via quizzes. Quizzes can give learners actual contexts in which certain grammatical items are employed, explain partially motivated aspects of language, and help learners think about the language on their own. It is often said that native speakers’ knowledge of grammar is usually subconscious. In EFL context, however, having learners consider the ways that native speakers of English seem to rely on when producing utterances is helpful. I’ll introduce some quizzes that I present in the first few class meetings of a semester in the next chapter.

3. Practice in the classroom.

In this section, I will write about what I usually do in the first few class meetings of a semester for intermediate or advanced learners of English. As for intermediate level learners of English, the class is conducted bilingually, which means explanations are given either in English or in Japanese, by taking into account the reaction of the students. On the other hand, in such classes as Communicative English or Academic Writing for English majors at the university level, the explanations are entirely given in English because it has been decided by the university that classes should be conducted in English. Since the achievement levels of the students of English majors are intermediate or advanced, and almost all the students are very enthusiastic to learn English, there is no problem giving the entire explanation in English. In order to help learners of English know partially motivated aspects of English and the fact that literal translation between the two languages does not necessarily work, I present quizzes on image grammar for English in class. I’ll share with you some of the quizzes here.

**Quiz 1:** In this sentence, is the bus moving or not?

*The bus is stopping.*

**Exercise:** You’re talking on the cellphone and the battery is going to die soon. You’d like to explain the
situation to your friend, and want to call the person back later. In this situation, what would you say?

Quiz 1 is the first quiz I usually give at the first class meeting of a semester. The main objective of this quiz is to let learners notice that literal translation between the two languages does not necessarily work (cf. principle 1) and it is also related to the ‘principle 3’ given in section 2.1. If the learners have memorized the meaning of be + V-ing form as ‘—shite iru’ in Japanese, they will think the bus is stopping means the bus is not moving. Unfortunately, however, the meaning of the sentence is that the bus is still moving. It’s slowing down and going to stop very soon. Then I present the image of be + V-ing that something is in the middle of doing something and the process designated by the verb has not been completed. Then I go on to the exercise to have learners practice this point more. Just by letting learners know that the verb die is used to express keitai no juden ga kireru, most students, including junior high school students mentioned in section 1, produced my battery is dying correctly.

Quiz 2: According to the dialogue, does Shelly like figs?
   
   Jack: You don’t like figs?
   
   Shelly: Yes.

   Exercise 1: Does this train go to Shibuya?

   Bob: This train doesn’t go to Shibuya?
   
   Katie: No

   Exercise 2: Did Maria sleep last night?

   Mr. Miller: You didn’t sleep a wink last night?
   
   Maria: Yes. I pulled an all-nighter.

Quiz 2 is another example of drawing students’ attention to the truth that literal translation between two languages can lead to misunderstandings (cf. principle 1). Most of you have learned when you were in junior high school that yes means hai, and no means iie. If you stick to this translation and interpret the meaning of yes as hai, you can’t answer the question in Quiz 2 correctly. The correct answer to the question in Quiz 2 is, of course, Shelly likes figs because yes is a symbol of an affirmative sentence. In this case, Yes means Yes, I like figs. Then I usually give a question like Exercise 1 for a practice. Then I go on to an advanced question as in Exercise 2. In this exercise, some students may be confused. Yes is a replacement of an affirmative sentence, so the meaning of this Yes should be Yes, I slept last night. However, the following sentence says I pulled an all-nighter, which means I stayed up all-night studying, so we can understand from this sentence that Maria didn’t sleep last night because she was studying for the tests the next day. This must be contradictory. That is what most students think. Then I say to the students that in this case yes does not mean Yes, I slept last night. What this yes represents is something else. Does anyone know what this yes is the replacement of? Then some students guess it right and answer that yes means yes, you’re right or yes, that’s right. Here I also mention that without the following sentence, yes here is understood that yes, I slept last night. Together with the following sentence, we can understand the meaning of yes in the example is yes, you’re right. The important point here is yes is a symbol of an affirmative sentence and what the affirmative sentence yes represents is understood in context.
Quiz 3: What is the meaning of the underlined part?

Nana: Do you know Frank Lloyd Wright?
Jack: Do I know him? I know of him, but I haven’t met him in person.

Exercise: In each of the sentences below, what is Shelly’s job?

(a) Shelly is preparing the exam.
(b) Shelly is preparing for the exam.

Quiz 3 is an example that I usually give in order to help learners notice the fact that one form for one meaning, and one meaning for one form, which is the idea given by Bolinger (1977: preface) and is also one of the fundamental concepts of Cognitive Linguistics (cf. principle 3). Based on the context as given in Quiz 3, students try to guess the differences in meaning between I know him and I know of him. After I give a quiz, I always give students some time to talk about it in pairs or groups of three. While the students are sharing their ideas with each other, I listen to what ideas they are giving walking around the classroom. Many of them guess right that I know of him means that I just know his name or face, but I haven’t actually met him in person. Then I ask the whole class if there are any volunteers who would like to explain, and let a volunteer share his or her idea with the whole class. Then I explain something as follow. If you say I know him, since him follows the word know directly, the sentence means that I have actually met him directly before. If you say I know of him, in contrast, since there is the word of between know and him, the relationship between know and him becomes indirect. It means that how I know him is also indirect. This phenomenon is called “iconicity” in Cognitive Linguistics. That’s why I know of him means that I know him indirectly, for example, by hearing about him from someone else. Then I give similar examples for students to practice this grammatical item. One example was shown above. Regarding this example, in (a) Shelly is a teacher, while in (b) Shelly is a student. The reason is in (a) Shelly is involved in writing the exam questions directly, while in (b) she is preparing something, in this case, studying for the exam. In (b) what Shelly is preparing is not the exam itself, but preparing herself for getting good scores on the exams by studying.

Quiz 4: (a) is natural, while (b) is awkward. Why?

(a) Obama, the president in the U.S., has visited Princeton.
(b) Einstein, the famous scientist, has visited Princeton. (cf. 松村1996: 83-84)

The objective of Quiz 4 is to let students know that the acceptability of a sentence is not only determined by the structure of a sentence, but is also influenced by extra-linguistic knowledge like contexts, background knowledge, cultural literacy (cf. principle 4). X has visited Princeton is a perfectly grammatical structure. When X is Obama, the sentence is natural, but when X is Einstein, the sentence sounds awkward. I also mention that ‘has + past participle’ form is an example of present tense. Then many students guess correctly that since Einstein passed away, it’s not compatible with the present tense has.

Quiz 5: Which one of the following expressions is an appropriate translation for inu to neko no dochira ga suki?

(a) Which do you like better, dog or cat?
(b) Which do you like better, dogs or cats?
Quiz 5 is another example of letting learners realize that context counts in understanding the meaning of an expression (cf. principle 4, also related to principle 3). We usually regard dogs or cats as animals or pets, so we do not think of them as dividable. That’s why (b) is the appropriate translation. The example sentence (a) sounds awkward, because we do not eat dogs or cats. In some cultures, however, dogs and cats are regarded as edible. In those cultures, (a) is also possible, when you want to ask whether your conversation partner likes dog meat or cat meat. Whether some noun is countable or uncountable is a reflection of how we construe the situation. Roughly speaking, any noun can behave as count or mass as long as they are used in an appropriate context and make sense. Language is dynamic. This idea is also what I want learners of English to realize through quizzes of this kind.

Quiz 6: What’s the meaning of the underlined part?

Shelly: How much do I need to pay?
Mr. Mirror: It’s okay. The check has been taken care of.

Quiz 6 is another example of having learners know that literal translation between the two languages does not always function (cf. principle 1). I usually ask my students to make their own sentences by using “take care of” in context before having them think about Quiz 6. The original sentences made by the students are like these: “I take care of my dog while you’re away.” “My mother takes care of my grandfather.” “Take care” All of the example sentences I just introduced here are correct, but I think they all show that the students have memorized the meaning of take care of as sewa o suru in Japanese. As long as the students stay with the Japanese translation sewa o suru, they will never produce sentences as given in Quiz 6. In most cases, however, when I present Quiz 6 and have students think about the meaning of the underlined part, most students can guess the meaning of the underlined part correctly7 and realize that take care of can be used in wider situations than Japanese sewa o suru. Then I give students a situation in which they use a sentence including take care of in context. One example is as follows. You want to use a DVD player in the classroom, but you don’t know how to use it. When you want someone to help you out, what would you say? Then some students say, for example, “I want to play this DVD, but I don’t know how to do it. Would you take care of it?”

Quiz 7: Fill in the blank.

The sun rises ______ the east and sets ______ the west.

Quiz 7 is also another example of how translation between the two languages does not necessarily work (cf. principle 1, also related to principle 2). Generally, the same situation is expressed in Japanese as: taiyou ha higashi kara nobori, nishi e shizumu. If Japanese learners of English express the idea in English starting with the Japanese equivalent, they will most likely say The sun rises from the east and sets to the west8 by directly translating ‘kara’ into from, and ‘e’

7 The underlined part can be paraphrased as: It’s on me today. I have already paid the check. So you don’t have to worry about it.
8 This sentence is frequently found on the internet, but all the URLs belong to Asian countries. (Ando 2003: 42)
into to. Regarding this phenomenon, I usually say the difference in language expressions between English and Japanese is rooted in their construal differences. Japanese people regard east as a starting point where the sun rises, and west as a goal. English speaking peoples, however, regard east as a box-shaped space in which the sun rises, and west also as a box-shaped space where the sun sets.

Due to constraints of space provided, I cannot introduce all the quizzes I usually present in the first few meetings of my classes. In addition to these examples, I usually give quizzes regarding grammatical points as follows: (a) the difference in meaning between simple present form and present progressive form. (b) Hiroi in Japanese does not have an equivalent in English. It should be translated into large, high, or wide in English according to the context. (c) Why is gatsukou ga owatsuta translated into school is over, rather than school was over? For further information, I’d appreciate it if you would refer to Imai (2010).

Many students have told me that they are very interested in explanations of this kind and they want to know more about other phenomenon like this. The questionnaires conducted by a public university I teach part-time also show that almost all the items in the questionnaires were 4.6 or more on a scale of 1 to 5. 5 is as the best and 1 is as the poorest in this scale.

(Aichi Mizuho College)

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