A Practice in the Classroom:

How to Get Learners to Recognize Cognitive Motivation of Constructions

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1. Introduction

This paper is part 2 of the practice in the classroom series that centers on an exploratory research methodology. The content of the practice is based on my teaching experiences of the past some 15 years. I will share with readers what I have been practicing in my classes, 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 that I gave at the annual CELES convention in Toyama on June 30, 2013. In this presentation, I focused on how to get learners to recognize cognitive motivation of constructions by introducing three examples that I felt were helpful for learners to understand the meaning of the expressions.

In learning English as a foreign language, these three principles should be borne in mind:

Three Principles

1. English cannot necessarily be translated exactly into Japanese, and translations can often even lead to misunderstandings.

2. Learning grammar is an inevitable requirement when learning English as a foreign language, but the quality of grammar for learning should fundamentally be different from that of the traditional grammar which has long been employed in middle and high schools.

3. Language has both 'arbitrary' and 'motivated' aspects. Since any grammatical explanation is just a guide\(^1\), explaining all the language expressions clearly is not possible. However, knowing partially-motivated aspects of a language will certainly help learners to improve their English proficiency.

Based on the principles given above, I have been practicing "Image Grammar for Better Communication"\(^2\) in my classes. In learning English as a foreign language, the three-stage process of "input, intake, and output" is inevitable (Kanatani 2013). This idea indicates that the first thing learners should do in learning English is listening to and reading as much English as possible, and try to memorize useful expressions consciously or subconsciously. However, it may sometimes be difficult for learners to memorize English expressions without knowing why certain expressions mean certain things. The concepts of Cognitive Linguistics will be of much assistance in this regard. In Cognitive Linguistics\(^3\), constructions are defined as symbolic structures (pairings) of

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1. This statement is supported by Keene (1969).
2. Most of the items I teach as "Image Grammar for Better Communication" is written in Imai (2010).
3. There is a reason for 'c' and 'l' in Cognitive Linguistics is capitalized. Yamanashi (2012: 1) writes that the study of cognitive sciences can be fundamentally divided into three stages. The 1st stage: symbolisms and calculation. The 2nd stage: brain science and connectionism. The 3rd stage: ecology, environment, and embodiment. The word "cognitive" is frequently used now, but the stage Cognitive Linguistics belongs to is the 3rd stage. In contrast, Chomsky's Generative Theory belongs to the 1st stage. That is why, in a sense, Chomsky's Generative Theory is also called "cognitive linguistics."

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forms and their meanings. Thus, we have constructions of different sizes (prefixes, suffixes, words, sentences) and different abstraction levels (specific expressions, lower-level schemas, higher-level schemas) as language knowledge, and these constructions basically have meanings. Giving learners some information regarding the form-and-meaning symbolic structure may enhance their learning processes in some cases.

In this paper, I’m going to start by writing about the fundamental difference between “English Grammar for Learning” and “English Grammar for Language Analysis.” And then go on to introduce a few examples that I have been practicing in my classes in order to get learners to recognize cognitive motivation of constructions. The items to be introduced here are: (1) “I’m between Ns” construction, (e.g. I’m between jobs.) (2) Why we say, “Business is slow” when business is shrinking. (3) The image of past form.

2. Theoretical Background

"English Grammar for Learning" is fundamentally different from "English Grammar for Language Analysis." Most Japanese teachers and learners of English, however, seem to think that studying “English Grammar for Language Analysis” is learning English Grammar. That is because the English Grammar that they have been teaching or learning, what is generally called, “school grammar,” and also has been employed in most reference books, is a typical example of “English Grammar for Language Analysis.” Unfortunately, “school grammar” is not necessarily appropriate for “English Grammar for Learning” because the quality of the information given in the “school grammar” may not help learners to get fluency in the target language. According to Shirai (2013), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theory has confirmed that getting declarative knowledge does not automatically lead to the acquisition of the language. If the purpose of the class is to learn about English metaphysically, as in English Linguistics classes in the tertiary education, studying “English Grammar for Language Analysis” may be desirable, but the grammar of this kind is not appropriate when the purpose of the classes is to acquire the language itself, as in English classes in middle and high schools. Since the main objective of “Grammar for Language Analysis” is to investigate how language works, it is considered most important to describe the characteristics of the language explicitly. In contrast, the objective of “English Grammar for Learning” is totally different. The grammatical items in “English Grammar for Learning” should be limited to the items that are helpful for learners to acquire or improve the language. In other words, “English Grammar for Learning” should cover the items for which giving declarative knowledge is effective to enhance the acquisition of the language. For this reason, it would be desirable that “English Grammar for Learning” should be designed and developed by researchers who major in English Language Teaching. Linguistic theories can be referred to, but they should not be directly applied to English Language Teaching.

2.2. SLA theory and “Image Grammar for Better Communication.”

According to Shirai (2013)4, SLA theory has shown that most of a foreign language can be acquired if learners are exposed to enough input, and are given adequate opportunities for output. That is to say, “the input and interaction model” is sufficient for acquiring most of the target language. Declarative knowledge is preferred by most teachers and students, probably because

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4 Dr. Shirai’s lecture talk at the 2013 JASELE convention in Hokkaido helped me to collect my thoughts and made it possible to relate what I’ve been practicing to SLA theory. The content of this paragraph is my summarization of Dr. Shirai’s lecture talk.
they feel as if they are learning something. Shirai asserts, however, declarative knowledge does not automatically help learners acquire the target language. That is because the knowledge that enables learners to use language is different from declarative knowledge. Acquisition and fluency derive from procedural knowledge, which enables someone to do something without knowing how to do it consciously, such as riding a bike or playing the piano. There are, however, some cases in which only the exposure to enough input does not ensure acquiring the items of the language. In such situations, declarative knowledge could be helpful for learners to acquire those grammatical items and improve their English ability. In this regard, Shirai says that the first thing for researchers to do right now is to clarify the grammatical items that can’t be acquired only by depending on the “input and interaction model” (2013: 508). Then in the second stage, researchers should consider how these grammatical items should be better explained.

Dr. Shirai’s lecture also helped me understand that the combination of sufficient input and declarative knowledge helps learners to acquire English. In this regard, “Image Grammar for Better Communication” (Imai 2010) is one efficient model. It is a kind of “English Grammar for Learning” method that I have been using in my classes, based on my learning and teaching experiences, derived from the principles of Cognitive Linguistics. One of the main characteristics of this type of grammar is that it does not explain all the grammatical items explicitly. Only the grammatical items that I feel are helpful for learners to improve their English ability are presented. This characteristic has been criticized by some Japanese teachers of English or linguists, who claim that “Image Grammar for Communication” does not explain all the grammatical items that are generally taught in “school grammar.” The reasons I did not cover all the grammatical items that are included in most grammar books are as follows. Firstly, explaining all the grammatical points in any language is impossible. That is the reason linguists are still investigating how languages work. Secondly, explaining the motivated aspects of the language helps learners understand the image of English better. Arbitrary aspects should be learned by encountering the expressions repeatedly. In “Image Grammar for Better Communication”(Imai 2010), I argue that only the grammatical items that promote cognitive motivations should be chosen.

It has not been clarified in the field of SLA what grammatical items can be acquired effectively with the help of declarative knowledge (cf. Shirai 2013: 508), but a model should be given by considering whether the grammatical items are arbitrary or motivated. In the next section, I will elaborate on this point.

2.3. Language is partially motivated.

As is described in section 2.2, SLA theory regards that in the process of second language acquisition, most part of the language is acquired through exposure to enough input, while some items are hard to get, only based on the “input and interaction model.” For those grammatical items, giving declarative knowledge is considered to be effective. The author thinks that Cognitive Linguistics will shed light on this matter. Before considering the compatibility of these two disciplines, confirm the characteristics of grammar from the viewpoints of Cognitive Linguistics.

What is Grammar?5

(a) Grammar is dynamic language knowledge, which is categorized based on metaphor, metonymy, and synecdoche. It includes different sizes and different schematic levels of expressions, some of which are units and others are schemas. There are many pieces of

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5 (A) and (b) are organized by the author in reference to the idea of Cognitive Linguistics. (C) is a citation from Taylor. (2012: 263).
expressions in your brain, and what you do when you produce a sentence is ‘cut and paste’ the pieces of expressions you need to convey your meaning\(^6\) (cf. Langacker: 2002: 264, Tomasello: 2002: 10).

(b) Acquiring a language is a process of categorization.

(c) Language is acquired by a strictly ‘bottom up’ process, through exposure to usage events, and knowing a language consists, not in knowing a battery of rules, but in accumulated memories of previously encountered utterances and generalizations which arise from them. (Taylor 2012:263) (Underlined by the author)

As stated in (a), since the grammar is dynamic and consists of expressions of different sizes and schematic levels, it is considered impossible to describe everything explicitly. And as Taylor says in the underlined part of (c), language is acquired through exposure to usage events. These two ideas in Cognitive Linguistics are compatible with the statement of SLA in that most part of the language is acquired through exposure to enough input. Regarding the other point that some aspects of the language are effectively acquired if declarative knowledge is given, the following idea by Littlemore (2009: 148) is compatible.

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. (Underlined by the author)

What Littlemore mentions here is also compatible with “Image English Grammar for Better Communication (Imai 2010),” in that if some language expressions are motivated, it is beneficial to explain to learners why it is that certain expressions mean certain things.

2.4. What kind of declarative knowledge helps learners to intake expressions.

In this section, I will briefly write about what kind of declarative knowledge is helpful for learners to learn expressions. Considering that people learn differently and the knowledge they have is also different, what kind of declarative knowledge is beneficial also differs from person to person and according to the learning stage of a person. There is one thing, however, that is common among optimal explanations. You can learn what it is if you consider how people usually understand new ideas or concepts. If you come across a new idea or concept, what do you usually try to understand or learn it? Most of you probably access some knowledge you have already had, which is similar or related to the new idea. In order words, some kind of metaphorical ability is employed when you learn new things. This process should be taken into account when declarative

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\(^6\) This process is named “usage-based syntactic operations” by Tomasello.
knowledge or cognitive motivation of language expressions is given. I will be specific about this point by giving a few examples.

Consider “hang up (the telephone).” This expression is not arbitrary, but motivated. It is a good example that teachers can explain to the students why “hang up” in this context means “stop the telephone conversation.” People used to actually hang the receiver up the hook of the telephone when the conversation was over. That is the reason that people say “hang up” when they stop the telephone conversation. Since a story of this kind is understood in reference to the knowledge that learners already have, giving explanations like this is thought to be helpful for learners to learn the expression.

Then how about “telephone”? Is this expression motivated or arbitrary? This expression is arbitrary for learners when they first need to learn the expression. The best and efficient way to learn this expression is to just memorize. Of course, the cognitive motivation can be given if we refer to the knowledge that “tele” means “far” and “phone” means “sound,” but since most learners do not have knowledge of this kind, it will probably be a burden for them to understand it. However, if the learners’ achievement level is more advanced and they have already known such words as, telescope, telegram, telepathy, television, the declarative knowledge that has just been introduced in this paragraph might be of some assistance.

In conclusion, what is most important to consider when giving learners declarative knowledge is to check whether the explanation is optimal for the learners or not. There is no absolute best way to teach or learn something new. The optimal way should be decided according to such factors as each learner’s learning style, achievement level, and the background knowledge the learners have that is related to the new ideas or concepts they are about to learn. One of the most important jobs for teachers to do is to “prescribe” the optimal way dynamically and flexibly.

3. Practice in the classroom.

In this section, I will introduce a few examples regarding what I have been doing in my classes in order to get learners to recognize cognitive motivation of constructions. The items to be introduced here are: (1) “I’m between Ns” construction, (e.g. I’m between jobs.) (2) Why we say, “Business is slow.” when business is shrinking. (3) The image of past form. In addition to these three examples, I’ll write about what I’m particular about when making example sentences that I use in my class. Specifically speaking, I try to use example sentences that I can use to explain the cognitive motivation of some expressions in the sentence. I’ll show you an example in section 3.4.

3.1. “I’m between Ns” construction.

Consider example sentence (1).

(1) I’m between jobs right now.

If you ask your students the meaning of this sentence, they may say that the sentence means that I’m busy doing many jobs at the same time, but unfortunately, that is not correct. This is an idiomatic expression, an indirect way of expressing that I’m out of work. Some native speakers of English commented that if you have a job interview while you are out of work, using this expression is recommendable since it gives a positive impression on the interviewer. I usually explain the meaning of this expression by showing the image as in figure 1. Imagine if you are in

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7 The content of this section is based on Imai (2013: 9-10), which is written in Japanese.
the timeline, then "you are between jobs" means that one job ended and you are looking for another one that you will land soon.

![Figure 1](image1.png)![Figure 2: The schematic image of I'm between Ns.](image2.png)

When I introduced these expressions in a class, one of the students came up to me after the class, saying: Is it possible to say "I'm between loves," which means I broke up with someone, and now I'm not seeing anyone. The student was completely right. I was very impressed with the student's question. This is a good example that good language learners generally say what they want to creatively, based on the language expressions they have learned. Then I picked up another few expressions that are categorized into the same construction as in (3), and asked for some native speakers' feedback. They commented that "I'm between jobs" is a frequently-used expression, but other expressions are not. However, all the expressions make perfect sense.

(3) a. I'm between loves [girlfriends/boyfriends].
   b. I'm between marriages.
   c. I'm between apartments.

As I wrote so far, when I introduce a new construction, I usually show some example sentences as input, together with the schematic mage as cognitive motivation. From the feedback given by the students, I feel that giving students declarative knowledge like this helps learners to improve their English ability.

3.2. Why we say, "Business is slow" when business is shrinking.

Regarding this item, I give a quiz shown in (4).

(4) Imagine a situation that you recently started to run a bakery.
   (a) Unfortunately there are still few customers coming. In this situation, you could say:
       Business is __________.
   (b) Luckily, however, your shop was featured on some TV show last week. After that,
       more and more customers are coming to your shop. In this situation, you could say:
       Business is __________.

The answer to quiz (4a) should be "slow." This quiz is another example that giving cognitive

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8 This is an expression I actually hear a native speaker of English say while having a conversation.
motivation should be helpful for learners to intake the expression. As explained in Imai (2010: 72), one way to why “business is slow” means “business is bad” is it has something to do with the fact that “run” is used with “business,” as in “run a business.” If something runs slowly, it’s likely to be regarded as the situation is not desirable. When “slow” is used with “business,” as in (4a), the sentence is interpreted metaphorically as the business is bad. How about (4b)? The answer to this quiz is: Business is picking up. This expression is related to the expression, “picking up speed.” People generally feel that the faster the speed is, the better, so “business is picking up” means business is getting better.

3.3. The image of past form.

Regarding past form in English, I usually show example sentences as in (5) below, and have students think the reason why the same past form is employed in these three different situations.

(5) a. Did you read the email I sent you yesterday?
   b. “I’m sorry for the short notice, but we’re having a party tomorrow night. Would you like to join us?” “I wish I could, but I have other plans.” < I’m sorry I can’t.
   c. Could you help me out? < Can you help me out?

Most students seem to have understood these three types of past forms as different things, but according to the concept that one form for one meaning (Bolinger 1977: preface), these three past forms should share the same schematic meaning. The schematic meaning of past form is “distance.” And three different kinds of distances are indicated by the form according to context. That is, distance from now, reality, and the person you are talking to. The first distance is chronological distance (as in example sentence (5a)), while the latter two are psychological distance (as in example sentences (5b) and (5c)). Whenever I explain this idea to students, most students are impressed with it and understand the meaning of past form deeper than before. What is important to bear in mind when referring to this idea of past form is these three meanings are not mutually exclusive. For example, in the example sentence (5b), the past form, “could” in the expression, “I wish I could, …” is used to not only talk about the situation that is opposite to the reality, but also show the politeness to the hearer. Regarding (5c), I give explanations as this. “Could you help me out?” sounds politer than “Can you help me out?” Do you know why? If you want to be polite to the person you’re talking to, you keep psychological distance between you and the person, so the past form is used.

3.4. My standard for choosing example sentences.

In my lessons, I provide example sentences that help learners recognize the cognitive motivations of certain language expressions. For this reason, I try to prepare example sentences based on two principles:

a. Example sentences that can be used in actual communication.

b. Example sentences with expressions that contain cognitive motivations.

I’ll elaborate on this point by considering example sentence (5c) above. (5c) meets both principle (a) and (b) given above in that this sentence can be used in daily communication and it includes the expression, “help someone out,” which is appropriate to explain why out is employed in this expression. If you need to say this sentence, what situation are you in? You should be in trouble or in a situation. That is the reason that you want someone to help you out of the trouble or the situation you’re in.
These are some of the examples that I have been practicing in my classes to get learners to recognize cognitive motivation of constructions. As far as I see the reaction of the students and the feedback they have given on the questionnaire conducted by the university, students seem to be satisfied with explanations of this kind and find the process of learning English more interesting than before.

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