

Teacher training for high school teachers: Grammar instruction

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1. Introduction

The 24th Conference of the Japanese Language Teachers' Association of the Northeast Region of the United States (JLTANE) was held at Williams College on the 19th and the 20th of June 2010. The theme of the workshop was "Raising the Next Generation – Teacher Training in Asian Language Pedagogy." The second day was designated as a special round-table discussion session. The present paper is a modified version of the paper I delivered at the round-table.

Amherst College hosted two grant-supported workshops for high school Japanese teachers, first in July of 2006 for one week and then in July of 2010 for two weeks. Another one is planned in July of 2011. The theme of these workshops is "grammar instruction" for high school Japanese teachers.

In the round-table discussion, I explained the structures and some differences of the three workshops in some detail, and gave the rationale for focusing on grammar instruction in these workshops. For the current proceedings, I will omit the explanation of the structures of the workshops so that I can focus on the importance of grammar instruction in foreign language classes, even in high schools, what grammar instruction entails, and how it should be dealt with in classroom.

2. Rationale for grammar instruction

Teaching "grammar" nowadays is perhaps one of the most unpopular aspects of teaching modern foreign languages in the classroom. Despite the ill favor into which grammar instruction has fallen, I will emphasize here that learning grammar is essential because it builds the necessary foundation for all four skills (speaking, reading, writing, and listening) of the target foreign language, "Japanese" in this paper, and because it is not possible to achieve a high proficiency level of the target language without this foundation. The important issue here is not *whether* but *how* to teach grammar in the classroom.

The idea of hosting workshops focusing on grammar instruction stemmed from my observation of a group of students who performed rather poorly in Japanese classes in the past decade or so here at the college. Many of them are those who had studied Japanese before coming to college. It is noteworthy to mention that the same problem has also been observed in some weaker college students taking Japanese for the first time as well as in some of the students who had learned Japanese without any formal instruction before taking Japanese at college (e.g., learned Japanese simply by living in a Japanese speaking community). There are, of course, exceptions, but the following characteristics apply to many such students:

- (1) Although these students sound somewhat fluent at first, their ability to produce new sentences and paragraphs that are appropriate for different and new situations, both in speech and writing, is limited in varying degrees and ways.
- (2) Their sentence structures have poor accuracy levels.
- (3) Their utterances are short and repetitive, and they are seldom able to speak at the discourse level, even when they are asked to do so.
- (4) Their written work lacks complexity, using only a limited number of sentence structures, and they seldom use appropriate conjunctions.
- (5) They often do not seem to be aware of differences between spoken and written Japanese.
- (6) They are unable to differentiate the formality levels for both spoken and written Japanese.
- (7) They are not aware that the meanings of equivalent vocabulary items of the two languages, here specifically English and Japanese, do not completely overlap. They rely heavily on the translation of words – i.e., they seem to assume that Japanese words and translated English words in glosses can be used in identical ways.

These patterns of weak performance seem to be rooted in the same ground – that is, they have very little knowledge of how words, phrases, clauses, and sentences are put together, and they rely heavily on the English translations of the “patterns” they have learned in their Japanese classes or in textbooks. In other words, the students who hit plateaus in learning Japanese have trouble grasping the structural aspect of Japanese.

The fossilization of inaccuracy and of misuse of phrases and/or sentences by these students seems to be so ingrained that many of them find it difficult to unlearn their incorrect speaking and writing habits in order to learn correct ways. This leads to their learning curves being rather flat, even when they stay in Japanese classes for many additional semesters at college.

Since the communicative approach and the proficiency-based and content-based types of instruction have become very popular in language teaching and learning, grammar instruction has increasingly been discouraged, and the phrase “grammar instruction” has come to have a very negative connotation in foreign language teaching.¹

Regarding the above movement in language teaching, Jordan (2000, p. 1) points out the following:

“Since the beginning of the so-called Proficiency Movement, there has been a tendency to try to fit Japanese into the same mold as the other languages of the world, particularly the languages of Western Europe. Of course, Japanese may be identified as ‘just another language,’ but when an American tackles it, the challenges are very different from those presented by Spanish.”

Doughty and Williams (1998, p.11) mention that “[t]aking the perspective that adult second language learning is, in many respects, fundamentally different from first language learning, we believe that leaving learners to discover form-function relationships and intricacies of a new linguistic system wholly on their own makes little sense.”

We, the teachers, learn a great deal from the comments and questions made by the learners of Japanese. It is my experience that the learners who have achieved a very high proficiency level of Japanese uniformly emphasize the importance of a thorough understanding of Japanese structures. For instance, one of the Japanese literature specialists, Lagana (1988, p.54) mentions the following:²

自然な日本語を話したり書いたりできるようになるために、日本語の文法と取り組んでいる西洋人にとっては、必要なのは、微妙な、日本人特有の心理構造や、日本の社会における、複雑な対人関係に関する詳しい説明などよりも、むしろ英語などのように、自動詞、他動詞、係助詞、格助詞、副詞、接続詞などの使い方に関する徹底的な指導である (translation: in order for us Westerners to be able to speak and write Japanese naturally, what we need is solid training in the use of such things as intransitive and transitive verbs, case and overriding particles, adverbs, and conjunctions rather than detailed explanations regarding complex personal relations in Japan or subtle underlying Japanese psychological facts.”

Lagana (1988, p. 204) also suggests the following to the teachers of Japanese:

“母国語を外国人に教えようとする日本人の場合には、特定の構文パターンが「自然」かどうか、ということだけでなく、その文法性、または非文法性の理由もよく知らなければならないのである (translation: the Japanese teachers who teach the foreign students their native language must know why certain sentences are grammatical and others are not rather than just telling the students that some sentence patterns are natural and others are not).”

Although different terms are used, what these two statements emphasize is the importance of grammar instruction in language classes. In the following section, I will first attempt to define the term “grammar.” I will then discuss why it is that a comprehensive grammar suitable for the learners of Japanese is lacking.

¹ See Miura (1998) and Wetzel (2000).

² All translations provided for Japanese quotes are my own. The translation is not word-for-word. In my translation I have omitted some things from the language in the original and at other times inserted some elements that are not in the original – I did so when I judged that it facilitated the comprehension of the intent of the author I have quoted.

3. On Japanese grammar

3-1 Definition of the term “grammar”

I have purposefully avoided using the term “grammar” up to this point except when referring to the title of the workshops. The reason for this is that the term “grammar” is not being used in any uniform way among Japanese teachers (nor among linguists), and so I will need to define the term before discussing “grammar instruction” further.

It may seem an easy task to define the term 文法 (the equivalent term for “grammar” in Japanese) because we use it very frequently in everyday life. Despite this common use, it has been used in very diverse ways.

First, let me explain how inconsistently the term is defined in dictionaries and how it is used by language teachers.

It is interesting to see how dictionaries such as 広辞苑 (*Kojien*) define the word 文法 (‘grammar’).

In the 1991 version, it is defined as the following: “普通、形態論と構文論とから成り、これに音韻論を加えることもある (translation: it normally consists of morphology and syntax – phonology may also be added).”

In the 2007 version, the definition of 文法 covers a broader sense: “一つの言語を構成する語・句・文などの形態・機能・解釈やそれらに加えられる操作についての規則 (translation: structures, functions, and interpretations of words, phrases, and sentences that form a language and the rules that are added for their operations).”

It is quite interesting that the words 機能 (‘function’)・解釈 (‘interpretation’)・操作 (‘operation’) are included in the more recent definition.

In the field of Linguistics, the term grammar “covers a wide range of phenomena” and “[s]everal types of grammar can be distinguished” (e.g., descriptive grammar, theoretical grammar, formal grammar, and traditional grammar, among others).³

The term “grammar” in the teaching of foreign languages is widely used as if the term possesses a uniform and universally agreed-upon sense. For instance, a common topic of discussion has been whether to teach grammar in Japanese classes or not. I once heard a high school teacher of Japanese saying confidently that she does not teach grammar in her classes because her students can figure it out on their own by the context and by giving lots of example sentences. This teacher is by no means an exception – many teachers in fact share this view. These teachers often emphasize that they have far more important things than grammar to cover in their classrooms.

Many teachers of foreign languages use the term “patterns” (e.g., “sentence patterns”) as if it were equivalent to the term “grammar.” The phrase “文法積み上げ式 (‘teaching by piling up grammatical patterns’)” is often used to refer to a method of teaching Japanese that introduces the students to a series of grammatical patterns, one right after another.⁴ In this case, the term, 文法 (‘grammar’) is almost always used to refer to “(phrasal, clausal, and sentence) patterns.”

Because there is no agreed-upon notion of grammar, I will give my own working definition here, so that I can proceed with this discussion.

In this paper, the term “grammar” is used to refer to a greater or more encompassing schematic structure of a language, and not just patterns. The most useful grammar for the students and teachers who learn and teach Japanese as a foreign language is “a systematic generalized description of Japanese that the native speaker knows tacitly on all levels.”

³ Crystal, D. 1985. *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*. Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell.

⁴ See, for example, 野田尚史・迫田久美子・渋谷勝己・小林典子 (2001) 『日本語学習者の文法習得』大修館書店.

Although I referred above to the tacit knowledge that the native speaker “knows,” this does not mean that Japanese native speakers could answer questions in ways that learners would be satisfied with. In fact, most native Japanese speakers do not know why certain things are the way they are, and most likely they will not, unless they are trained teachers, be able to explain satisfactorily to the learners of Japanese why they say the things they say. It is the scholar’s task to describe such grammar. “Knowing” here refers to intuition that we all have as native speakers of our own language. I will below give some examples of what I mean by “knowing the native language on all levels.”

Native speakers of any language can judge what sounds right and what sounds wrong without being able to explain why. It can be at the sound level – they know what combinations of sounds are possible and what are not. They can detect when words are pronounced in a strange way. The native speakers would know how to express pleasure, disappointment, or other emotions by using certain tones of voice.

On the word and sentence levels, native speakers would know what words can be used in what type of sentences and in what situations. They would know the central meanings as well as the implied meanings of most words (the number of words each individual knows would differ greatly here). They would know idioms and unique expressions, and they would know how certain sentences are used in certain situations.

On the discourse level, they would know how to develop a story line by using the acceptable omissions, additions, and conjunctions.

The above is only a very small portion of what “knowing” a language natively entails. But the native speakers know these things, and not just smart people but all people who have the normal capacity for things.

We, as language teachers, must know this type of grammar in order to present our students how the particular language works. Wetzel (2000) calls this knowledge “the common sense of the native speaker of a language.”

All these things must be formally taught. Adult students cannot pick up on their own everything that is essential to being a competent speaker, reader, and writer. These things have to be taught in a systematic way: simply presenting them as facts would result in very poor learning.

In the next section, it will be shown that the sort of comprehensive grammar that is useful for learners has not been researched enough, but the need for doing so is real. Most importantly, we will have to be aware of how these things ought to be taught, which will be discussed shortly.

3-2 Absence of comprehensive Japanese grammar

The unfortunate fact, then, is that we have no known grammar that is accepted by all educators for the purpose of learning and teaching Japanese.⁵

Shirakawa (2002, p. 54) calls the sort of useful grammar that I mentioned above, “外国人のための実用日本語文法 (‘practical Japanese grammar for the learners of Japanese as a foreign language’),” and concludes that “日本語を外国語として学ぶ人たちのニーズに応える真に実用的な文法はまだ整理されていない (translation: currently there is no practical grammar that responds to the needs of the students who study Japanese a foreign language.”

Shirakawa (2002, pp. 58-59) also adds the following, with which I entirely agree:

現実的な切実性という点から見ると、「外国人のため」を念頭に置く場合とそうでない場合とでは、自ずと異なる。外国人のやくに立たない、抽象的な文法や穴だらけの文法でも、日本人は一向に困らないのである。しかし、一見したところ混沌としている様々な文法現象を、包括的に、秩序だてて説明するという知的興味の対象として日本語を考えるならば、「外国人のため」か否かは問題にならない (translation: from the realistic and urgent view point, the situation differs between a grammar for foreign learners and one for native

⁵白川博之 (2002) 「外国人のための実用日本語文法」 『月刊言語』 . Vol. 31. No.4., 54-59.

speakers. This is because the native Japanese would not find it a problem when such a grammar is fragmentally described or abstract, but such a description would be useless for learners of Japanese as a foreign language. However, if a true comprehensive and orderly grammatical description exists, then, the grammar should be the same regardless of who the user might be.”

As Shirakawa hinted above, most research on Japanese grammar is abstract and fragmental, and there is no known comprehensive Japanese grammar that is useful for foreign learners of the language. There are quite a few books that discuss some aspects of grammar, and there are even some books entitled “comprehensive Japanese grammar,”⁶ but most of these are collections of patterns of Japanese sentences with example sentences. Some are written in Japanese, and so the beginning, or even intermediate students, cannot use them as reference books.⁷

There are many reasons for the absence of such a comprehensive grammar, but I will point out only a few that may be directly relevant to the purposes of the current paper.

First of all, the research on Japanese grammar is widely based upon the Western languages, and as a result some descriptions are questionable and not useful. This aspect of research is especially problematic in teaching and learning Japanese. Although the following statement dates from 1950,⁸ it still holds true today:

“今日、文法学の基礎知識は日本語についてよりも、むしろ英、佛、獨等のヨーロッパの諸国について与えられる方が多い。そこで、日本語の文法についても、ヨーロッパの諸国語の文法を基準にして考えたがる。その結果、割り切れない多くの現象に行き当たる・・・日本語の文法は、日本語そのものに即して観察されないかぎり、正しい結論を得ることは困難なのである・・・ヨーロッパの言語の法則が一般文法の原理であるかのような錯覚を打破することが何よりも大切である (translation: much of the basic knowledge of the study of grammar today is obtained from the notions used to describe European languages such as English, French, and German. It is common for scholars to study Japanese grammar based on the findings of the European languages. As a result, they face unreasonable and difficult issues. Unless the Japanese grammar is studied based on the observation of how Japanese language works, it is not possible to make correct conclusions. It is very important to go beyond the distorted notion that the principles of European languages are the principles of all languages).”

More recently, Miller (1988, p.46) writes:

“After studying a number of pedagogical tools prepared by Japanese scholars with a view to initiating Westerners into the grammar of the Japanese language, the Italian sociologist Fosco Maraini concluded, with good reason, ‘applying the patterns characteristic of the Indo-European family to a language that developed in a totally different environment is like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole’.”

Perhaps this lack of a comprehensive grammar is the reason why the Japanese teachers and even linguists present sentence patterns with the equivalent English translations as a substitute for grammar. I am not denying that some sentence patterns can be useful (such as fixed expressions or idiomatic phrases) as a part of grammar, but a collection of patterns alone cannot be a comprehensive grammar of Japanese.

Up to this point, I have mentioned that it is important to teach grammar, not just patterns, to the learners of Japanese so that they can learn the language to a high proficiency level, but the problem is that there is no known comprehensive grammar to teach from.

⁶ For instance, see Kaiser, S., Ichikawa, Y., Kobayashi, N., and Yamamoto, H. 2001. *Japanese: A Comprehensive Grammar*. London: Routledge.

⁷ For example, see 白川博之 (監修)・庵功雄・高梨信乃・中西久実子・山田敏弘 (著) (2001). 『中上級を教える人のための日本語文法ハンドブック』 スリーエーネットワーク

⁸ 時枝誠記 (1950) 『日本語文法 口語篇』 岩波全書

The next questions would then be (1) how can we teach grammar in our classes if there is no agreed-upon comprehensive grammar in the field of teaching Japanese; and (2) how would we teach it in classroom?

In what follows I will, as an example, discuss what Amherst College has been doing in regard to the two questions raised above.

4. Grammar instruction in Japanese classes at Amherst College

4-1 In a typical class

Wetzel (2000, p.12) gives the following suggestions in regard to the teaching of Japanese:

- a. There should be a focus on form that arises within the context of content.
- b. The primary focus should always be communication.
- c. The teacher should draw attention to form rather than leaving it to chance that students will notice.

The above points have implications for many important aspects of teaching and learning Japanese as a foreign language. Forms (i.e., structures of language), for example, should be formally taught, but they should be introduced in context (i.e., teachers should avoid piling up forms without context). The usage of these forms in proper contexts (i.e., communication) should be the goal of teaching.

In recent years, these forms and structures have been taught in many different ways, but I typically observe the following common way. In almost all popular textbooks in recent years, each chapter begins with a dialogue. The teachers as well as the textbooks highlight some structural aspects of sentences that are used in the dialogue, and these structural points are presented as sentence or phrasal patterns with brief explanations in English. The teachers may have their students practice these new patterns. What the teachers do with the dialogue seems to vary. Some teachers almost always have the students memorize parts of or entire dialogues. Other teachers may ignore the dialogues after having the students practice the new patterns. The point here is that they almost always use the sentences or expression in the dialogue to introduce new sentence or phrasal patterns as grammar.

The teachers often reserve some class time to explain the grammatical aspects or usages of the patterns they need to introduce in a given chapter because the explanation of these patterns in the text is usually very short, or grammar notes are available but they are written only for the instructors and not for the students. So, the teachers make handouts to supplement the material. The students take notes while listening to the explanations of the teachers.

4-2 Some problems associated with starting with functions

I see two problems in the above way of introducing new material.

One is that most of the forms introduced via dialogues are fragmental and unrelated to each other, even when they are used in the context of the dialogue.

Another is that the students who take notes while listening to the teacher do not record the same things in notebooks or remember the same things. They waste a great deal of time listening to the teachers' explanations. And teachers waste a great deal of time making innumerable handouts (which some students lose or misplace).

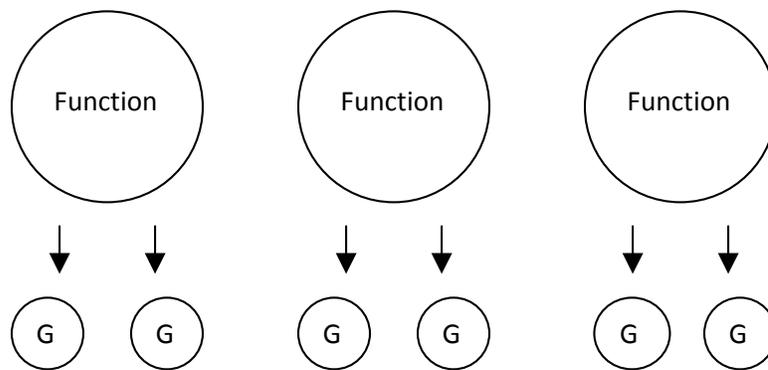
Here I would like to turn to the issue of "learning." It is useless to discuss teaching unless we know something about how students learn in general.

Miller (1956) asserts that a human being can memorize approximately seven (plus or minus two) new unrelated items at once. The unit of an item can be any size. If someone tries to memorize seven unrelated numbers, then a number is the size of an item. If someone tries to memorize five new unrelated words of a foreign language, then a word is the size of an item.

A sequence of items can be made into a bigger unit by making the sequence into a more meaningful unit. For instance, a sequence of numbers, 2-9-8-3, may be four separate numbers, but by adding the meaning to the sequence as “ni-ku-ya-san (i.e., にくやさん) ‘meat shop’” to this sequence of numbers, the original four separate items can be made into one item. This kind of meaningful grouping is called “chunking.”⁹ This concept can be quite useful in introducing new items, such as words or grammatical items, in our classes.

As mentioned above, the term, 文法積み上げ式 (‘a method of teaching by piling up sentence patterns’), is used as an example of an ineffective way of teaching. It is inefficient because introducing pattern after pattern without any context or connections between the patterns would only be burdensome to the learners due to the memory limitation discussed above.

The typical classroom situation, as just described, gives rise so easily to the 文法積み上げ式 (see above for the meaning) because, as we have seen, each chapter of the popular textbooks begins with a dialogue. From the sentences in a dialogue, both the textbooks and teachers single out new patterns that the students must learn. The following is a schematic model of this kind of teaching. “F” stands for function and “g” grammar.



As seen above, the items, namely the grammatical patterns introduced via sentences used in a dialogue, seldom have meaningful connections.

It would be much more desirable and meaningful if new structures introduced were connected to the ones introduced earlier so that the old and new items could create meaningful “chunks.” We can still successfully teach functions via these structures.

The key here is that the number of basic structures and principles that the students must learn is finite in number, but the number of functions that they could learn is indefinite. It seems more logical and reasonable to learn the finite number of structures as soon as possible, along with some examples of functions in which the newly-introduced structures are used. It is reported that children acquire the basic and complete structures and principles of their first language relatively early in their life, and the language acquisition continues for life by learning further functions and vocabulary.¹⁰

4-3 Teaching and learning by integration of “stages” and “steps”

I did not mention first language acquisition in order to imply that foreign languages are learned in the same way or should be taught in the same way as the first language is learned, but rather to show that learning the principles relatively early will provide the meaningful context for learning the infinite number of functions that the students must learn over many years.

⁹ For definition of “chunking,” see Miller (1956).

¹⁰ This information can be obtained in any introductory linguistics textbooks or language acquisition books. For instance, see Akmajian, A., Demers, R.A., Farmer, A.K., and Harnish, R.M. 1998. *Linguistics: An Introduction to Language and Communication* (fourth edition). Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

I will briefly illustrate how learning principles builds the foundations for other areas of learning as well.

For instance, when learning to play a piece of music with a musical instrument, it helps if the learner knows how the piece sounds in its entirety before working on details. The entire piece of music is constructed with certain combinations governed by the principles of music. Different expressions can be worked into the piece in an indefinite number of ways, just like functions in language.

When building a house, the exact mathematical structures must be constructed to meet the design of the house; only after the structure is completed can one attend to the details of the building, such as the color of the walls or the pieces of furniture. Without the solid structure of the house in mind, one cannot discuss the contents of the house.

The ways an entire piece of music is composed and a building is built are analogous to the foundation of a language that I refer to in this paper. Many layers of details make up the entire piece of music or the entire building, but they are all principle-based. Likewise, the grammar of a language is composed of multiple principles, and the different parts and the details are inseparable parts that constitute one thing, the grammar of a language.

Having this knowledge of the grammar gives a great power to our students because this knowledge is what makes it possible for them to comprehend what they read, to express their thoughts by writing and speaking, and to comprehend what's been said to them. It is said that the same utterances or sentences are seldom repeated except for set expressions, so that the students without the knowledge of grammar would need to understand (in the sense of figuring out) each new utterance and sentence in order to communicate successfully. Of course, the students would need to know and understand vocabulary, but that is not enough for comprehension. Without the grammatical knowledge, important messages would not be comprehended.

Using the above notions, I have devised two intertwined methods to introduce new material to students: one is "stages" and the other is "steps."¹¹

4-3-1 Stages

In our approach to teaching Japanese at Amherst College, we introduce grammar in "stages" and functions in "steps." Each unit begins with the introduction of new structures followed by applications of these same structures into the spoken and written language. In other words, the order of introducing new materials is opposite from the popular method used in most recent textbooks.

In this section, the concept of "stage" will be introduced. The entire course is divided into four different stages. The grammatical structures in Stage 1 consist of basic structures of Japanese.

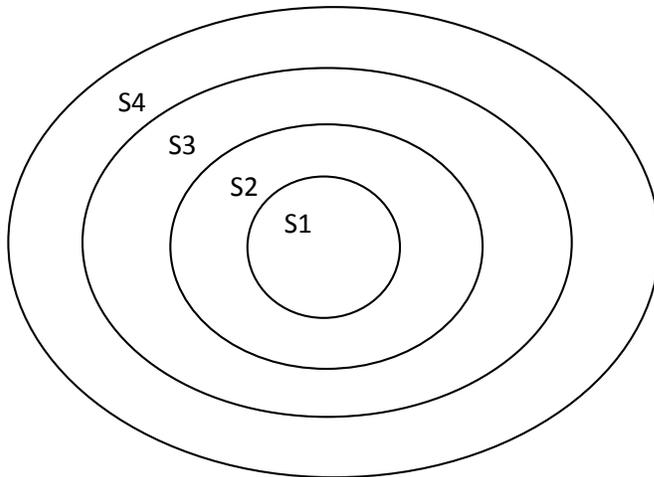
In Stage 2, complex structures that are composed of the basic structures in Stage 1 are introduced. The items introduced in Stage 2 are linked with the old materials introduced in Stage 1, thus "chunking" is utilized.

In Stage 3, structures of similar meanings are compared and contrasted.

Stage 4 should be used only for reference – quite a few structures are listed by categorization, and they are not meant to be taught as items to be learned in sequential order.

By Stage 4, the students have learned the overall structures of Japanese, and so such a listing will be helpful to the enrichment of their language once they have encountered some of these structures listed in Stage 4 when reading or listening to others.

¹¹ See Tawa, W. 2009. *The Japanese Stage-Step Course* (Grammarbook, Workbook 1, Workbook 2, Writing Practice Book). London: Routledge.



In addition, several principles that the students ought to be aware of are taught from the beginning and throughout the textbook. They are the following:

- (1) Vocabulary learning – relying only on the translation in dictionaries and textbooks is dangerous. The meanings included in two equivalent words in English and Japanese are almost always different, and it is good to learn them or at least be aware of them. Also, the kind of vocabulary introduced in each chapter of any textbook is limited – learning vocabulary that is relevant to the learner is most effective.
- (2) Spoken vs. written languages – differences between the two must be objectively learned. Just because students can say certain things does not mean that they can write them properly. When conversing, people use all sorts of devices that we call “conversational devices,” and we teach them as conversational features. Different features must be learned for writing. For both “speaking” and “writing,” there are multiple levels and genres, and each must be taught separately.
- (3) Cultural appropriateness – just because the sentence used is grammatical does not imply that the sentence is proper for the particular situation or the culture. This kind of cultural appropriateness must be taught and students must be made aware of such things.
- (4) Conversational devices – conversations must be learned by principles rather than by memorizing dialogues.

There is a common grammar book in the textbook series from which both the students and teachers read. The existence of this book allows the teachers to avoid explaining each new concept. Instead of wasting time to explain what is already written in the book, the teachers can first confirm the students’ understanding of the new concept using Japanese. Secondly, when confirming the new structural concept, the workbook is made so that no new vocabulary is used – thus, two new things are not introduced at once (see below for this). There is always only one new component in the practice.

When a new structural aspect is introduced, it is always introduced by using the old structures that the students are familiar with. The intent here is to make use of “chunking” as much as possible so that the new element together with the old unit would together form a meaningful unit.

4-3-2 Steps

Using the newly introduced structures, four skills are introduced in steps focusing on each skill separately, and here the functional aspect is greatly emphasized.

As we all know, we speak our first language effortlessly and automatically. This act is, however, a very complex one, as DeKeyser (2001, p. 125) shows below:

“The ultimate of automaticity is probably our ability to use language. Through a complex chain of mental operations, carried out in a fraction of a second, we can convert complex thoughts and feelings into sound waves ... Given the complexity of this skill and the speed with which it is used, it is not surprising that it takes years to acquire, and that learning a new language in adulthood is a slow and frustrating process.”

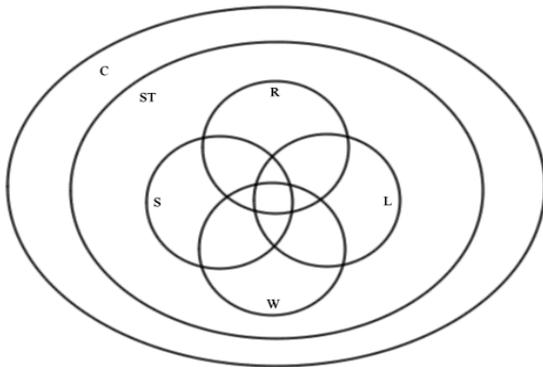
According to DeKeyser (2001), the research on automaticity focuses on the description of characteristics of automatic acts, but no practical methods are suggested as to how to achieve automaticity.

Learning a foreign language may seem to imply the learning of multiple tasks all at once, but it has been shown in the field of cognitive science that human beings are not able to do two new things at the same time.¹² They can do two things simultaneously when at least one of the two is an automatic act. They can do three things at the same time when at least two of the three are automatic acts. This has been shown in many different learning situations. Babies stop walking when they first learn to speak or vice versa. We stop acting when a new thought comes to our mind. When a music student learns to play a new piece of music, the playing is not fluent when the student is trying to read new notes on the music sheet.

Applying this to language teaching, we must know that all four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) are processed in different parts of our brains,¹³ so each skill must be learned separately. So, we cannot expect the students to be able to write what they can read, to speak what they can write, and so forth. When we teach, especially the beginning students, we should teach only speaking when we want them to speak, and only writing when we want them to write, etc.

A famous music educator, Suzuki (1946, translated in 1996) says that “[t]he purpose of ability development, in brief, is to create a highly active brain. In order to achieve this, I would like to recommend focusing on a single area ... ‘he who chases after two hares gains neither.’”

The following diagram shows that all four skills overlap somewhat, but do not entirely coincide. ST below stands for “structures” and the structures hold the meanings of all these skills. Outside of all these structures and skills is C “culture” that determines that a certain expression is culturally appropriate.



Keeping the above in mind, each skill is introduced separately, as three different steps. But the same new structures are used to introduce all these skills in these steps.

Step 1 consists of new structures and vocabulary. In this step, only when the students have comprehended the new structures is the new vocabulary added.

¹² LaBerge, D. 1995. *Attention Processing: the Brain's Art of Mindfulness*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

¹³ Damasio, A. R. and H. Damasio. 1993. *Brain and Language*. In *Readings from Scientific American: Mind and Brain*. New York: Scientific American., 54-65.

In Step 2, spoken language is applied to the structures learned in Step 1. The students learn the principles of conversation in this step, and try to gain as much fluency as possible.

Step 3 focuses on written language, both reading and writing. In all steps, the awareness of the cultural appropriateness is always emphasized.

As described above, an infinite number of functions is learned by way of the structures the students have learned. The students are made aware that the functions learned in the textbook are only examples and that there are infinite ways to express the same function in any language, and it does take a long time to learn them proficiently.

5. Conclusion

The approach used at Amherst College to teach Japanese as a foreign language integrates many past approaches suggested in the field. But the pillar of the method is to teach the principles of the language solidly, because doing so lays the foundation for all four skills in the target language.

It may take a while for teachers to appreciate and comprehend this approach because it may seem to go against the most popular current methods.

High school teachers in particular are nowadays pressured by the requirements involved in such things as 5C and AP courses and examinations. High school teachers often talk about the gap between what the students learn in high schools and colleges,¹⁴ but this statement is actually a very strange one if this is what they believe. Regardless of who studies Japanese, they should be learning the same thing, i.e., Japanese. If they are referring to such differences as the number or even the kind of kanji they learn at high school and college, then, it is not a big issue. If they mean that students learn different kinds of words in the two settings, that is still not a big issue. But if they believe that the two groups, the high school students and the college students, are learning two different things, then it seems to be a very big problem. All students, whether they are in high school or college, have to learn the same principles in order to be functional in the language. Skipping these basics and trying to somehow achieve the goals more quickly only interferes with real learning.

We also have to be mindful of individual differences – regardless what method is used in a language program, individual differences will occur. This difference should not be ignored but must be dealt with. Each program has its own limitations, but the instructors should be creative in dealing with the differences of individual students.

There is no shortcut in learning a foreign language – it is labor intensive, but it is true that there are effective ways to learn the target language and there are ineffective ways. Whatever the methods might be, we must not ignore the importance of building a very solid foundation so that meaningful elements can be built onto this solid foundation. When the foundation is incomplete, we cannot build anything upon it.

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¹⁴ Personal communication at the workshop in 2010. Amherst College.

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