

## Integrating an Interactive Approach to Teaching Grammar in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom: A Case Study of a Japanese Senior High School Student

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### Abstract

At a time when new language-teaching trends encourage the use of interactive methods to motivate and maintain student interest, the persistent tendency to retain a teacher-centered approach in teaching English grammar is counterproductive. With more effective methods currently available, monotonous rote learning need no longer dominate the main part of a lesson. Guided by the work of Ur (2009), this paper will introduce the results of a case study conducted by interview. In response to these and other related findings, a model for an interactive, multi-skilled, learner-centered activity designed to effectively teach a specific grammatical concept will also be presented.

**Keywords:** teacher-centered, grammar-translation, learner-centered, interactive, collaborative, multi-skilled, communicative approach/methodology

According to Ur (2009, p. 5):

Grammar, then, may furnish the basis for a set of classroom activities during which it becomes temporarily the main learning objective. But the key word here is *temporarily*. The learning of grammar should be seen in the long term as one of the means of acquiring a thorough mastery of the language as a whole, not as an end in itself.

Based on Ur's (2009) statement, we can understand that the learning of grammar represents only one component of a much bigger pedagogical picture. Particularly within the context of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom, the focus should not center exclusively on an approach and methodology that caters specifically to the teaching of grammar alone. On the contrary, as Ur further discusses, in the teaching of grammar "the emphasis is on successful communication and any learning of grammar takes

place only as incidental to this main objective” (p.5).

## Overview

In an attempt to put Ur’s words into practice, this paper will introduce the results of a first cycle of a participatory action research project. Action research in (language) education involves a process where critical reflection challenges the educator to bring about pedagogical improvements based on observation, collection of data, change-action, and reflection on the newest results attained. Repeating this process helps to ensure that the implementation of change and improvements remains consistent. Within the context of the EFL classroom, nagging questions about the approach to teaching grammar motivated me to explore the effectiveness of integrating a more interactive and communicative approach/methodology. The current project consisted of three main parts, described in the following sections: In the first section titled *The Interview*, the reader will be introduced to the results of a case study conducted by interview with a Japanese first-year senior high school student (equivalent to senior high school Grade 10 in the North American high school system) in the fall of 2013. In the second section titled *Classroom Activity*, the information gained from the student’s experience with learning English grammar was recorded and later applied in the form of a (model) activity worksheet. This same section also includes a model lesson plan detailing one recommended method to conduct the activity in the classroom. The third and final section titled *Future Classroom Implications*, presents a commentary regarding potential future teaching implications as a result of integrating an interactive approach and methodology to teaching grammar in the EFL classroom.

### I . The Interview

#### 1 ) Student Background:

The participant interviewed for this case study was Ms. Mayumi Hasegawa (pseudonym). Mayumi belonged to the English language concentration program, which means that compared to other programs offered at her school, she took part in a greater number of English language classes including grammar, reading, writing, and oral communication (OC). Aside from the OC classes, which were taught by native English-speaking teachers, Japanese teachers of English (JTE) conducted all other classes within the English concentration program.

Mayumi began studying English as a compulsory subject from her first year of junior high school. She was motivated and had a positive attitude towards the subject. Before conducting the interview, I spoke with Mayumi about the possibility of interviewing her on the topic of English language problems; grammar

specifically, as it applied to her own situation. Mayumi readily agreed and we scheduled to hold an interview on a Saturday afternoon. I contacted her parents beforehand in order to ask for their permission. Mayumi's parents agreed to the interview and saw this as an excellent learning opportunity for their daughter. I carefully explained the format of the interview – structured with a set of ten questions and that the length of the interview would take approximately thirty minutes. I presented Mayumi with the list of questions one week before the interview, so she would have time to prepare.

Regarding issues of privacy and confidentiality, I requested and received Mayumi's permission to digitally record our interview and explained that a pseudonym would be used when referring to her. Finally, at the end of the project, I presented Mayumi with a written record, transcribed verbatim, of our conversation.

The notations used in the transcription of the interview are adapted from Pickford, 2006, p. 10.

In what follows, the interviewer's utterances are demarcated by "I". Mayumi's comments are demarcated with "M". Where a speaker pauses for some time, the length of silence is indicated by the number of seconds, for example, (2.0). Other transcription notations used in the interview can be found in Appendix 2.

## 2) Interview procedure

General questions:

Realizing that we were both feeling a little nervous from the start, I began the interview with general questions to make us feel more relaxed. Noticeably, the mood and tone of the interview began to shift once the interview changed from a structured exchange to what Kvale and Brinkmann (2008, p. 2) describe as "an interchange of views between two persons conversing about a theme of mutual interest."

The first questions dealing with topics most familiar to Mayumi were purposely selected to help her ease into the initial part of the interview:

- I : OK. Can you please tell me what grade you're in now?  
 M : I'm in the (1.0) Uh. High school...Uhm? Hmm. High school (2.0). The second year of the High school.  
 I : Oh. So you're in the second year of high school? [Um.  
 I : Ah. OK. And (1.0), umm. What languages can you speak?  
 M : Umm. I can speak *Japanese* and some English.  
 I : OK. Very good. Have you ever studied English in a foreign country?  
 M : *Yes*, I went to 'Kanada' {Canada}. Um. *Canada* (1.0) for one month. [Umm. For one month in  
 Canada. OK. Good.

(Excerpt from interview transcript).

i) **Difficulty with specific grammar points:**

I : OK. Soooo, alright, let's go on to the next question. When you first started to learn

English, Umm (1.0) What (1.0), what part of English did you find most difficult? What areas of English learning did you find most difficult for you?

M : I thought that the *grammar* (1.0) is difficult for me.

I : OK. Can you think of two (1.0) grammar points (1.0) that were most difficult or are maybe still difficult for you?

M : '*Judoutai to*' {passive tense} (1.0) Umm, '*judoutai to*' {passive tense} Umm. '*Genzai kanryou*' {present perfect simple}. OK?

(Excerpt from interview transcript).

Like Mayumi, the thought that English grammar is “too difficult” is a common belief held by many of her peers. Although students are exposed to several years of compulsory English language education by the time they graduate from high school, most have yet to master the simplest grammatical rules correctly. As Leachtenhauer (2013, p. 30) describes:

The majority of Japanese university students have had at least six years of English grammar instruction at the junior high and high school level. However, when asked to produce written or spoken English, they often make simple mistakes in their use of verb tenses.

ii) **Concerning approach and methodology:**

I : For example, 'has been' or 'have been.' [I have been... OK. I understand. And how were they taught to you? How did the (English) teachers teach those points to you?

M : Umm. [Just the usual explaining it in front of the class?

I : Or did they have worksheets? [Yes. Did your class do communication games? [No. What did you do?

M : Umm. Our (1.0) teacher wrote (1.0) [Right. On the board? And (1.0) umm. [Textbook?

Yes. Textbook.

I : Textbook. So, no communication games or pair work or anything like that? [No. So, the teacher was main. In front of the class?

M : Yes.

(Excerpt from interview transcript).

What Mayumi is describing is a typical situation in many high schools all over Japan. Rather than adopting a more communicative approach to the teaching of grammar, many educators insist on maintaining a rote-based, teacher-centered, grammar-translation approach/methodology. The problematic nature of such an approach is that “it teaches people about the language and doesn’t really help them to learn the language itself” (Harmer, 2005, p. 30). In support of Harmer’s assertion, English grammar researcher Larsen-Freeman (2003, p. 10) cautions that “[Although] control of the grammar of a language can be empowering ... following its rules unswervingly can be imprisoning.”

Indeed based in a similar EFL context, Cakir and Kafa (2013, p. 39) report that the teaching of grammar in Turkey’s high school EFL classes has also met some challenges. According to Cakir and Kafa (2013, p. 40), the Grammar-Translation Method, which bases itself on “teaching grammatical rules in isolation and where students are expected to memorize all the rules,” became the preferred method of teaching EFL in Turkey. However, this preference for a grammar-based approach was not by choice, but rather as a result of Turkey’s geographical location. In an effort to resolve these challenges, Cakir & Kafa (2013) report that the Turkish government has since implemented new measures that encourage the use of technology in the classroom for a more communicative and interactive approach to EFL.

iii) **Reasons for difficulty with specific grammar points:**

I : Why were these two grammar points difficult to learn, do you think? Like other points are easier for you, right? Like present tense, past and future, present progressive. Those ones.

So, how come, suddenly, those points that you said (1.0) became difficult to learn?

M : Umm. [What happened? *Because*, I think (1.0) that I don’t often use those ‘nani’ {how to say} (2.0) those *grammar*, so, (1.0) maybe it’s difficult for me.

I : Ah. I see. Because you don’t practice them every day. In everyday conversation. [So.

M : (2.0) And (1.0) [Can you give me some examples? Yes. (1.0) I confuse ‘judoutai’ {passive tense} with ‘noudoutai’ {active tense} [I see. Right. (1.0) And I confuse ‘genzai kanryou’ {present perfect simple} with ‘kako kei’ {past simple}. Umm.

*They* are difficult for me.

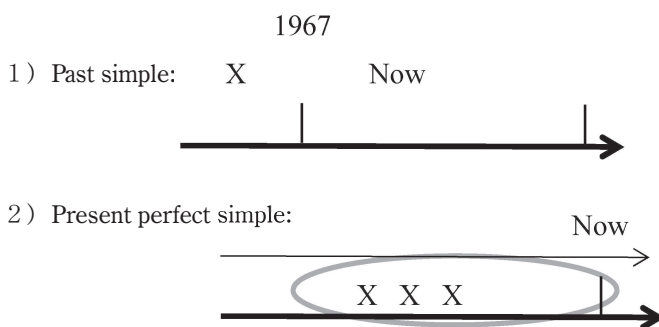
(Excerpt from interview transcript).

According to Mayumi, it appears that her grammatical difficulties are caused by a tendency to confuse one form with another. Including two separate sets of grammatical tenses - the “active vs. passive forms” and the “present perfect simple vs. past simple,” Parrot (2008, p. 294) informs us that these are common errors for learners. According to Parrot:

Learners may fail to recognize a passive construction, thinking that the subject of a sentence is the agent [the doer] when it isn't. For example, in the following statement, they may understand that the giraffe was the attacker:

A giraffe *was attacked* by three lions.

In regards to the confusion surrounding “present perfect simple and past simple constructions,” Parrott (2008, p. 188) comments that this is caused by the inability to understand the differences regarding certain (grammatical) notions of time. The two time lines below are used to illustrate this point:



In the first time line, the past simple form represents the year 1967 as a completed period of time. And in the second time line, the present perfect simple form shows 3Xs representing an uncompleted period of time having its origin in the past and which is continuing to this day.

Admitting that it is often a challenging task for EFL teachers to adequately pinpoint existing grammatical problems, Parrott (2008) adds that through text analysis or classroom observation, it becomes possible to identify and tackle students' grammatical difficulties effectively. However, as the teaching of English grammar in Japan insists on maintaining a grammar-translation approach/methodology, this is completely at odds with the multi-skill approach, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing that this paper proposes and which Parrott advocates. In comparison, it appears that learners in Iranian EFL classrooms share a similar experience to their Japanese counterparts, where the answer to addressing learners' grammatical issues is built around an uninteresting, teacher-centered, grammar-translation approach/methodology. As Mahmoudi and Amirkhiz (2011, p. 137) criticize:

In grammar sessions, which could be hardly recognized from a Persian course ...  
[t]he teacher was obsessed with the translation of the words and sentences into

[the first language: Farsi] L1. ... [f]ollowed by determining the type of the sentence (e.g., active/passive)... [T]he class was so monotonous; there was no fun and variety in the language activities. The teacher was the only voice.

When referring back to both Parrott and Ur, we can understand that this example, which demonstrates a strong tendency towards a grammar-translation and teacher-centered methodology, is counter-productive as it does little “to meet students’ needs” (Graves, 2000, p. 101) and promote “the teaching of grammar for successful [verbal] communication” (Ur, 2009, p. 5).

iv) **Two (sets of) difficult grammar points for Mayumi**

Examples:

1) **Passive voice vs. active voice :**

- A friend of ours is repairing the roof. (active)
  - The roof is being repaired by a friend of ours. (passive)
- (Swan, 2009, p. 385)

2) **Present perfect vs. past perfect:**

- *I've seen* this film *before*. (present perfect simple)
- (Swan, 2009, p. 457)
- During our conversation, I *realized* that we *had met* before. (past perfect simple)
- (Swan, 2009, p. 423)

I : Alright. I see. Thank you, Mayumi. (1.0) The next question. OK? [OK. So, when did you (start to ) have those problems? Was it like (1.0) from this year? Second year of high school?

First year of high school? Junior high school? When did you start to think; wow, those two (grammar points) are difficult for me? [Umm. When did that start happening?

M : From this year. [Ah. OK. From this year. Yes.

I : And have you started to improve (recently) on those points? [*Yes!* OK. What have you done to improve those points? To get over that challenge? [Umm.

M : By doing extra practice questions. [From worksheets or... From the textbook. [From the textbook. I see. OK.

(Excerpt from interview transcript).

v) **Discussion of the grammar forms:****Explaining active and passive verb forms**

**Active verb form:** According to this form, if we wish to make the subject the one who conducts the action (the doer) within the sentence, then it becomes necessary to use an action verb such as *built*, *speaks*, *writes* immediately after the subject.

**Passive verb form:** In the case of a passive verb form, if we wish to make “the receiver of the action” the subject of a sentence then, it becomes necessary to use passive verbs following the subject e.g., *was built*, *is spoken*, *is being written*.

**Example:**

**Active:** Mr. and Mrs. Wilkinson built this house in 1959.

Subject    Verb    Object

**Passive:** This house was built in 1959.

Subject    Verb

In this example, we find that “the object of an active verb becomes the subject of a passive verb.” (Swan, 2009, p. 385).

vi) **Describing active and passive verb forms:**

The two tables below offer some examples of the usage and structure of active and passive verb forms as they appear within affirmative and negative statements and questions:

1) **Active form:**

Affirmative	Question	Negative
They <i>built</i> this house in 1486.	Did they <i>build</i> this house in 1486?	They didn't <i>build</i> this house in 1486.

(Source: Adapted from Swan, 2009, p. 385)

2) **Passive form:**

Affirmative	Question	Negative
This house <i>was built</i> in 1486.	<i>Was</i> this house <i>built</i> in 1486?	This house <i>was not built</i> in 1486.

(Source: Adapted from Swan, 2009, p. 385)



vii) **Describing present perfect and past perfect forms:**

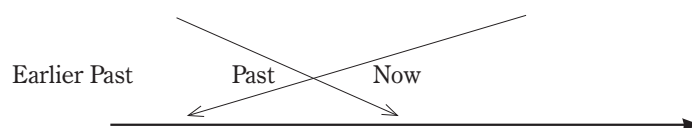
**Present perfect form:** The present perfect form is used when referring to the past but while thinking or making reference to both the past and the present at the same time.

**Past perfect form:** The past perfect form is used to make a reference to an “earlier past” event. In other words, it is used “to clarify that something had already happened (earlier past) at the moment that we are talking about it” (Swan, 2009, p. 423).

**Example:**

The timeline below is used to describe the grammatical concept of an “earlier past” as we talk about an earlier event:

When I *left* the house, the postman *had already delivered* the mail.



(Source: Adapted from Swan, 2009, p. 397)

The two tables below offer some examples of the usage and structure of *present perfect simple* and *past perfect simple* forms as they appear within affirmative and negative statements and questions:

**Present perfect simple:**

Affirmative	Question	Negative
I have studied you have studied, etc...	have I studied? have you studied? etc...	I have not studied you have not studied, etc...

(Source: Adapted from Swan, 1991: p. 185)

**Past perfect simple:**

Affirmative	Question	Negative
I had studied you had studied, etc...	had I studied? had you studied? etc...	I had not studied you had not studied, etc...

(Source: Adapted from Swan, 1991, p. 190)

**II. Classroom Application****1) Activity worksheet:**

As a result of the insights gained through the interview with Mayumi, one of the grammatical problems described by her was used to create a communicative and interactive (model) activity worksheet meant to be applied within the context of an EFL (high school, junior college, university) classroom. At the very least, the purpose of this type of activity is to increase the students' level of motivation and participation by making use of a learner-centered (participatory) as opposed to a grammar-based (teacher-centered) approach and methodology.

**2) Student Assessment:**

If informal or even possibly formal student assessment were to become necessary during the lesson, the following three-point criteria is recommended as a model assessment framework:

- 1) Students' level of interest and motivation
- 2) Students' attitude and level of participation
- 3) Students' ability to re/produce the target language

The level of interest and motivation shown by particular groups of learners towards learning EFL varies considerably from student to student. For example, in the case of highly energetic students (at any level), teachers would do well to present them with lesson content, materials and activities that are challenging, engaging and stimulating otherwise, they may easily become bored and distracted.

**3) Teaching and learning activities:**

Although two sets of grammar points were introduced earlier, the focus of the activity would be, as in this occasion, centered on a single grammar point; namely, the present perfect simple tense. The type of activity chosen to support and supplement the teaching of this grammar point would involve the use of an interactive and multi-skilled worksheet such as the one being introduced in this current paper. Recommended for a false beginner and/or low intermediate-level high school, junior college, or university

class, the students taking part in this type of classmate interview activity, would find themselves involved in an activity that is set on applying and reinforcing all four basic macro skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

During the classmate interview activity, “scaffolding” or a form of guided practice would be used to gradually and progressively lead students to a more independent way of studying. A scaffolding approach/methodology according to Peregoy & Boyle (Peregoy & Boyle, cited in Celce-Murcia, 2001, p. 166) is one that “involves the setting up of ‘temporary supports’ provided by capable people that permit learners to participate in the complex process before they are able to do so unassisted.” Ultimately, the aim of encouraging learners to study increasingly on their own is to decrease dependency on the teacher while at the same time, improving their ability to study on their own.

#### 4) Lesson Plan & Materials:

With the use of an interactive and multi-skilled activity based on the students’ summer holiday, the learners would be fully engaged in a classmate interview and guided role-play conversation meant to improve their level of comprehension and correct usage of a specific grammar point namely, as illustrated in the (1) Lesson Plan and the (2) Activity Worksheet representations below, the present perfect simple tense:

##### (1) Model Lesson Plan

Lesson Plan: Overview				
<b>Objective:</b> The students will take part in a guided communication activity focusing on the correct usage of present perfect simple tense expressions.				
No.	Activity	Time	T's Activity	Ss' Activity
1	Greeting & Attendance	3min	*T calls the roll	**Ss confirm their presence
2	Review of last lesson	5min	T reminds Ss of topic of last lesson (present perfect simple tense)	Ss listen attentively.
3	Introduction of new lesson activity	10min	T introduces & explains activity. Confirms meaning & pronunciation	Ss listen attentively & practice pronunciation.
4	Interview section (1)	12min	T observes & evaluates activity	Ss circulate around classroom to interview classmates.
5	Writing section (2)	2min	T instructs Ss to write own original answers	Ss write own answers to personalize task
6	Writing section (cont'd)	3min	T instructs Ss to share answers with a classmate	Ss share answers with classmate
7	Original conversation (3) activity (pair work)	3min	T instructs Ss to write own answers to complete dialog (semi-guided)	Ss write own answers to personalize dialog
8	Class presentations (pair work)	10min	T instructs randomly selected pairs of Ss to present dialog to class	Ss present role-play dialog to class
9	End of the lesson	2min	T concludes lesson by reminding Ss to prepare for unit review quiz in the next lesson	Ss listen attentively & make a note of their task
<b>Reflections:</b> During pair work, Ss should be encouraged to practice “Read, Remember & Say” to increase eye contact & reduce dependency on worksheet to make dialogues appear & sound more natural. Use of appropriate gestures & facial expressions could also be encouraged.				

\*T = Teacher

\*\*Ss = Student/s

## (2) Model Worksheet Activity

## Interactive Worksheet

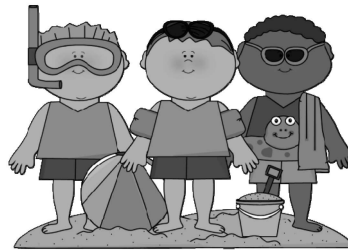
## Focus: Present Perfect Simple Tense

Find someone who ...

Summer Holiday Report

## 1. Classmate Interview:

- Walk around the classroom.
- Interview your classmates.
- What did they do during the summer holiday?



## Example:

Question: Have you ever + past participle + object (?)

Answer: Yes, I have. / No, I haven't.

## Classmate Interview

1. Find someone who has been to an amusement park. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) been</u> to an amusement park? Name: _____
2. Find someone who has eaten watermelon. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) eaten</u> watermelon? Name: _____
3. Find someone who has seen a fireworks display. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) seen</u> fireworks? Name: _____
4. Find someone who has read a 'Harry Potter' novel. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) read</u> a 'Harry Potter' novel? Name: _____
5. Find someone who has traveled to another country. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) traveled</u> to another country? Name: _____
6. Find someone who has climbed Mount Fuji. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) climbed</u> Mount Fuji? Name: _____
7. Find someone who has gone camping. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) gone</u> camping? Name: _____

8. Find someone who has played beach volleyball. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) played</u> beach volleyball? Name:
9. Find someone who has watched a 3-D movie. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) watched</u> a 3-D movie? Name:
10. Find someone who has done volunteer work. <b>Question:</b> <u>Have you (ever) done</u> volunteer work? Name:

(Source: Adapted from Ur, 2006: p. 232)

## 2. It's Your Turn!

**What did you do during the summer holiday?**

Please write down two things that you did during your summer holiday.

Use examples from the interview above or use your own original answers. Good luck!

### Example:

This summer holiday, I have been to Tokyo Disneyland and I have seen a fireworks display.

### Your answer:

This summer holiday, I have \_\_\_\_\_ and I have \_\_\_\_\_.

## 3. Conversation:

### Pair Work

1) Read the conversation below. Change the underlined parts.

Use the examples above to help you **or** use your own original ideas. Good luck!

**A :** How was your summer holiday?

**B :** It was great, thanks.

**A :** By the way, have you (ever) been to an amusement park?

**B :** Yes, I have. I've been to Tokyo Disneyland.

OR

No, I haven't. I've never been to an amusement park.

2) Practice the conversation with a classmate. Take turns to practice both roles. Good luck!

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ No: \_\_\_\_\_ Class: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

End of the worksheet activity (Paper size B4)

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### III. Future Classroom Implications

As enunciated by Ur at the beginning of this paper, the teaching of grammar should only serve as a temporary tool that provides a solid and logical structure to the target language with which learners are attempting to communicate. Representing a means to an end rather than an end unto itself, the teaching and learning of grammar through the practical use of a multi-skill approach and methodology benefits both teacher and students alike. When reflecting on the future classroom implications made possible by integrating a more interactive approach and methodology in the EFL classroom, we realize that by consciously and purposely choosing to move beyond traditional patterns of teaching, it then becomes possible to create a learning environment where students like Mayumi can effectively develop their overall language skills in a more balanced, integrated and pedagogically encompassing manner. Bergeron (2015, p. 17) recapitulates this important point by affirming that:

...a teacher's choice of [activities] strongly influence[s] and characterize[s] the teaching/learning environment, group dynamics and ultimately, the students' willingness to learn.

#### **Conclusion:**

By opting to provide EFL learners with the tools, the creative space and the opportunities to increase their levels of competence and confidence through more interactive, creative and communicative forms of language learning, educators afford their students a much freer form of experimentation and expression of the target language. By applying a learner-centered approach and methodology to the learning of complex grammatical concepts, this will ultimately encourage second language learners to take more responsibility for their own learning process. As a result, teachers will realize that by applying and integrating this type of pedagogical strategy within their own EFL classroom, their students will become increasingly motivated, competent and confident English language learners.

## Appendix 1:

### List of Interview Questions

1. Can you please tell me what grade you're in now?
2. What languages can you speak?
3. Have you ever studied English in a foreign country?
4. Have you ever studied English at an English conversation school?
5. Have you ever taken private English conversation lessons?
6. When you first began to study English, what part of the language did you find most difficult?
7. Can you think of two grammar points that are difficult for you?
8. What is difficult about these grammar points?
9. Can you give me an example?
10. Why are these two grammar points especially difficult to learn?
11. What have you done to improve those points?
12. Based on your own experience, what does it take to become a good language learner?

## Appendix 2:

### Transcription Notations

I	Interviewer
M	First initial of interviewee's name
[	Overlapping talk
( )	Words spoken not audible on tape
(2.0)	Pause approximated in seconds
(was)	Transcriber's best guess for word's spoken
WORD	Capitals indicate words spoken loudly
(( ))	Transcriber's description
?	Speaker's questioning intonation
slo:ow	Colon(s) indicate prolonged sound
<i>never</i>	italics indicates words which are emphasized

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## インタラクティブアプローチを活用した英語文法教育 日本の高校生を事例として

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英語文法教育においては、従来の単なる暗記学習を主とする教師主導型アプローチに代わり、学習者の英語学習への動機付けと興味・関心を促進する双方向的な教授法が有効であるとされ、現在の新たな傾向となりつつある。

Ur (2009) の論考に基づき、筆者はまず、1名の日本の高校生に対して英語の文法学習の困難点に関するインタビュー調査を実施した。この調査結果をもとに、筆者は文法的概念を効果的に指導するための双方向、かつ、統合的な学習者中心の英語活動モデルを設定した。本稿では、まずインタビュー調査について報告し、その活用の有効性について記述した。