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# Caught in the Middle: Grammar, Textbooks, and the Japanese High School

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*In many high schools, the grammar textbook seems like an immovable fixture in English education. This article discusses the possibility of using Data Driven Learning (DDL) in high school environments which are resistant to change. After considering some of the pragmatic difficulties with using student-based learning while still employing set textbooks, the article proposes using a hybrid of teaching methods to introduce DDL in the classroom. By using both the textbook and information from the British Nation Corpus, students can be taught to explore grammar rules on their own terms while still meeting the requirements of learning the required grammar. Finally, the article discusses changes in implementing such a program and practical steps teachers can take to move forward in using DDL in their classrooms.*

**Key Words:** *Data Driven Learning, Motivation, Grammar Textbooks, Corpus*

## INTRODUCTION

In the EFL world, teachers are often caught between theory and practice—what is presented in journal articles and through research as the best way to teach English to non-native speakers and what is the reality ‘on the ground’ in real-life EFL environments. This tension is particularly present in arguments about the role of the grammar textbook in the classroom. While theoretical writings and research papers consistently criticize grammar/ translation methods and texts, many institutions have little time or interest for progressive theories and practices in EFL. For many, the grammar textbook is an unmovable fixture in the classroom.

This article will discuss the space between these two worlds and the role of Data Driven Learning (DDL) in changing pedagogic practices in rigid institutions and how a moderate, integrated approach focused on incremental changes might be the best solution for real-world grammar teaching situations. Also addressed will be the current trends in research in teaching grammar in the EFL classroom while contrasting findings with the widespread use of grammar textbooks. Noting a discrepancy between theory and practice, a methodology employing both DDL methods and grammar textbooks will be presented. Finally, how integrated methodologies might begin to be accepted on an institutional level will be discussed.

## BACKGROUND

This study was conducted at a large private high school in Niigata City, Japan. Students range in age from 15 years old to 18 years old with a background of three to five years of mandatory English instruction. Most students' English ability is limited to correcting grammar mistakes, learning vocabulary, and doing dictation with little or no speaking practice in the classroom. The author serves as an Assistant Language Teacher (ALT) with responsibilities ranging from leading pronunciation drills to complete control of classroom activities. As students are focused on preparing for rigorous college entrance examinations, most class time is used to memorize grammar points and lexical items, with little time left for the practical application of English.

## **CURRENT PEDAGOGIC GRAMMAR THEORY**

*Grammar teaching has traditionally consisted of giving learners opportunities to produce specific grammatical structures. Such an approach may prove ineffective because it does not take account of how learners acquire grammatical structures.*  
(Ellis 1995: 87)

At the heart of current research and theory on teaching grammar in the English classroom is a realization by many researchers and teachers that textbook grammar, at best, is an incomplete picture of real-world grammar usage. At worst, it is an arbitrary system of rules that ignores authentic English usage, whether it be in spoken situations or written discourse taken from real corpus data. (McCarthy & Carter, 1995). With the advent of Corpus Linguistics, the shortcomings of grammar textbooks have been easy to point out. Corpus studies frequently reveal that authentic English is rather disobedient to the idealization of 'Standard English' (Milroy in Bex, 1999: 18).

The appearance of the corpus has begun a movement towards a descriptive, rather than prescriptive, grammar. Dictionaries now feature real corpus data, and Collins COBUILD has effectively changed how definitions of words are produced. If, as Hopper has observed, grammar is emergent (i.e. temporal, changing, and disputed) (1987: 141), then it follows that grammar 'rules' should also be emergent and subject to the same changing ebbs and flows of grammar evolution. The rule (if a rule can be observed) comes from the usage observed, not vice-versa.

This change in thinking has been deeply effective in many areas of EFL thinking and research. Ellis has published widely on this subject, presenting a 'bottom up' approach to teaching grammar (1991, 1995, 1998). A kind of DDL has emerged, using computers and corpora as an informant, rather than a teacher (Johns, 1991: 1). The goal of these teaching methodologies has been to change the classroom into an interactive environment in which students read authentic texts and corpus data and devise their own rules and understandings of grammar structures. If students are able to see English as it is, the argument goes, they will be able to produce it as it is.

Whether it be in consciousness-raising activities with authentic texts or looking closely at corpus data, this model of teaching encourages teachers to move away from rule memorization and internalization and towards something more organic. Even the powerful Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan has recognized the need for a communication-based pedagogy that moves away from the traditional grammar-translation methods that have driven EFL learning in Japan since its inception (Sakui 2004: 157). It seems that on every theoretical level, pedagogies, textbooks, and methodologies based solely on the rote memorization of grammatical rules and principles are being questioned.

## **REAL WORLD SITUATIONS**

Unfortunately, this flood of evidence, bureaucratic decree, and scientific finding has done little to change how English (and particularly grammar) is taught in the Japanese high school system. The introduction of ALTs in the late 1980's was meant to, in part, help remedy this problem and encourage a system in which 'communicative competence' was introduced to the English classroom (McConnell, 1999: 30). There has been some progress in this area, but by and large, non-ALT classes are still non-communicative and grammar-based (Sakui 2004: 158). There remains a very clear distinction between the 'real' instruction of grammar-based texts and lectures and the special communicative classes in which an ALT participates.

While in compulsory education (to a small extent elementary school, but largely Jr. High School and High School), students are introduced to grammar principles through textbook-driven, Japanese only instruction (Sakui, 2004: 157). Students are encouraged to memorize rules and lexical items for exams that test largely their knowledge of these principles, but not necessarily their ability to use them in communicative or 'real world' settings. ALTs are brought in occasionally for communicative activities and drills, but they are largely used in a subordinate position and only a supplement to the teaching that occurs a majority of the time. A boom in private schools, teaching 'English conversation' have stepped up to, in theory, fill the void. However, English conversation is seen for the most part as something entirely different from English and even English speaking (Lummis, 1976). It seems that there is more than a little confusion about what grammar is and what role it plays in English communication and education.

Who is ultimately responsible for the problems at the high school level is a question that often leads to a circular finger pointing. Whether or not the system would significantly changed if either the high schools chose a different path of English education or the universities revamped their examination system is a largely theoretical question. For teachers, the reality of the situation is most important: students must be prepared to do well on entrance examinations.

The consequence of this problem has been a serious misunderstanding of what grammar is and the role the textbook has in learning English. Educators acknowledge that textbook and form-based grammar instruction plays a role in helping students move towards the ultimate goal of acquisition. It seems that the grammar textbook has not completely failed, but that, perhaps, too much has been expected of it. If teachers and learners are interested in creating the most dynamic classroom that work for different learners with different needs, discarding one tool simply because it is not completely sufficient to meet all the needs of the learner does not mean that it is useless. It simply means that learners and teachers must re-think the grammar textbook and re-conceptualize it, admitting its shortcomings and acknowledging its usefulness.

## **DDL AND THE TEXTBOOK**

While the question this article asks is whether or not the grammar textbook has a place in the EFL classroom, a question of this sort may very well seem absurd to the non-native English teacher in a Japanese Jr. or Sr. High School. In many cases, individual teachers have little choice as to what text to teach or not teach and with the pressures of college entrance examinations always looming, teachers might feel safer opting to choose the most tried and true method, rather than scrapping the system entirely. Moreover, teachers still continue to view grammar as a system of rules and with some amount of fear (Kerr in Hadley, 2004: 100), so grammar textbooks may continue to be the least complicated and safest option. It seems that incremental steps that allow teachers to adjust to changes and move forward without the pressure of having to immediately change their pedagogy in mid-stream would be the most prudent.

For the purpose of this paper, a grammar textbook from the context school (Ogino, 2006) will be used to suggest that, with a grammar textbook as a base, teachers can make steps to implement lasting change in their classrooms without entirely abandoning the grammar textbook. The text considered in this paper is used to teach writing at the second grade high school level. Although the class focuses on writing, students are not expected to write, but rather study grammar rules and demonstrate this understanding through answering information gap questions about correct grammar usage (i.e. fill in the blank, multiple choice) and also doing short translations of Japanese texts that, in translation, potentially use the grammar concept from the chapter in the English translation.

This presentation of grammar principles in the textbook has several downfalls. First, the textbook does not contain (and students are not required to use) target grammar for any communicative purpose. The grammar is presented in the textbook in example sentences with the teacher providing additional comments on confusing structures, but no opportunity to use the grammar point is provided. The textbook contains exercises for students to write their own paragraphs exploiting grammar principles, but these exercises are routinely skipped to save time. Second, the textbook exercises use translation of Japanese texts to

help student produce the chapter's grammar structures in English. In some instances, the English grammar was naturally produced in an accurate translation of the text. In other situations, however, the text would need to be translated into an awkward English sentence to produce the same target grammar.

The model chapter (13) used for this paper focuses on the language needed for permission and prohibition, as well as helping verbs. The pattern for the model lesson is identical in every chapter with the teaching portion of the text spilt into a 'Function' section (for teaching permission and prohibition) and a 'Grammar' section (for the teaching of helping verbs). Both sections include only Japanese sentences and the English translations of the Japanese which feature the target language and grammar in bold. On the following page, there are three practice sections and an 'Express Yourself' section. Typically, the practice problems are fill-in-the-blank grammar questions. The 'Express Yourself' section encourages students to produce their own sentences based on a writing prompt.

For class preparation, students have done workbook exercises for the previous grammar lesson. A standard class period at the context school would consist of the following from Chapter 13 (Ogino, 2006: 46-47):

Introduction to grammar structures by classroom teacher	10 minutes
Reading of example sentences (ALT)	5 minutes
Individual exercise problem solving	5 minutes
ALT checks answers	10 minutes
Individual translation of Japanese	10 minutes
ALT checks translations	10 minutes

**Table 1**

With teachers often responsible for several English classes a day, club activities, and office duties, this type of class is advantageous because little time is needed for preparation and the same structure can be repeated easily in any class with no need to create any new materials. Students are also silent during the class period, allowing little chance for students to act out or disrupt the teaching. Students are also given valuable practice for the college entrance exams as all questions are modeled after known exam structures and some problems are taken from old, published exams. The focus of this instruction is mainly to have students recognize the patterns of the grammar structures and where various grammar

words might be expected in a given pattern (e.g. 'Do you mind if' is usually followed by an SVO clause and that a 'Do you mind if' plus verb structure would be unacceptable).

In looking at the grammar textbook and how it is used in the classroom, the problem seems to be less with the textbook and more with the execution. If the same textbook could be used in a class that also employed theories of DDL and descriptive grammar, the textbook might be able to serve a function of an 'answer key' to the students' investigation, another resource to be exploited in the grammar investigation. If the same class can be executed using the same textbook and with the same goals (that of preparing students for the college entrance exams), but also employ aspects of descriptive grammar investigation, teachers might be able to ease away from grammar-translation methodology.

For the purpose of this article, the same lesson was used to produce a more communication based, data-driven lesson.

In preparing for class, students should be asked to do several searches using the British National Corpus (BNC):

1. Please find 5 corpus lines using the phrase 'Do you mind'
2. Please find 5 corpus lines using the phrase 'have to'. Only present lines which follow the pattern 'have to + (verb)'
3. Please find 5 corpus lines using the phrase 'supposed to'. Only present lines which follow the pattern "supposed to + (verb)"

The following lesson plan was also produced from the same text as earlier:

Students compare corpus lines and discuss meanings, perception of use, and produce their own model sentences	20 minutes
Full class discussion of findings, led and guided by teacher	15 minutes
Textbook explanation	15 minutes

**Table 2**

This methodology requires that students be taught how to use corpora and access information from the online BNC. Students will also need access to a computer. If computer access is limited at school, students should be allowed to access the material in groups before class.

Students using the BNC are likely to find corpus lines that behave in accordance with the rule the textbook is seeking to teach. A search of the BNC using 'do you mind' gave the following examples:

*'Do you mind if I use the phone?'; requested Pam.*



*'Do you mind if I have a look over the garden?'*  
*'Do you mind telling me your position here, Miss Carne?'*

These lines are neither especially complicated nor use difficult lexical items. It is likely that students will search for sentences that they understand more readily than others. This corpus data shows very clearly the intended textbook target grammar 'do you mind if + S+V', but also shows that 'do you mind + V-ing' is also acceptable. Students are asked to present only 5 lines as this will insure they choose lines with known lexis and which are of interest to the students. If a group of 4 students compare 5 corpus lines each (for a total of 20 lines), this is certainly a manageable amount of material and should give a good sense of how the grammar behaves in authentic usage.

This approach employs the textbook grammar explanation as a supplement to the corpus data, allowing students to first investigate the grammar on their own, but following up the corpus investigation with the needed reinforcement of the textbook explanation which they will be required to know and reproduce for college entrance exams. The textbook, however, is not the starting point of the discussion and students are first required to do the work of DDL in groups. This methodology meets the two-fold demand of English education: to be able to prepare adequately for the grammar-driven college entrance exams, but also be able to cull these rules from real data and communication before turning to the textbook. The textbook explanation is a final step to the learning process, one that encapsulates, not predicates.

This type of lesson planning has several distinct advantages and challenges for execution in a real world high school situation:

### **1. Using corpus data and authentic texts**

Looking at the model examples in the textbook, it is very clear that the sentences have been written to best present the grammar rule. Although these sentences are not especially awkward, by looking at corpus data, the students can get a feel for the grammar principle, particularly by noting recurring patterns. The use of the corpus can be daunting, but if students are able to search for themselves, they will likely produce data that is at their own level. Also, as students in the context school have a relatively solid grasp of vocabulary, they should be able to deduce meanings of unfamiliar usages. The textbook can be consulted as a valuable reference for the corpus data. This particular text (with the target grammar in bold) can quickly help students compare and contrast real usage with the model usage and easily see how structures have been produced.

The main drawback of using corpus data is the time commitment that students and teachers must make to investigating usages, parsing lines, and choosing data that is presentable to students. Indeed, in earlier research projects at the context school, teachers showed less



than enthusiastic responses to corpus studies and the possibilities of using corpus data in their own classrooms. For authentic texts or corpus data to be used in classes, it seems that some teacher training must be done to help teachers understand that time spent presenting authentic texts is not time wasted and that authentic texts and usages are preferable to textbook examples.

## **2. Requiring real communicative activities in the classroom**

By building the exercises in this proposed lesson on communication, grammar principles can be seen for what they are: vehicles for communication. Whether or not the target grammar from a given day is used or not is ultimately unimportant. In the textbook translations that torture English sentences to produce a given grammar structure, the whole point of learning the grammar point was lost. Sentences are not produced to ideas. If students are placed in situations where they are able to actually communicate, it is certainly more likely that they will use English.

Although listening tests have recently been added to many college examinations, being able to communicate effectively in English (whether it be spoken or written) is still not included in most examinations. With the pressure for students to succeed, even if teachers are eager to have their students communicate in English, precious classroom time is often spent on exercises that explicitly prepare students for exams. For some teachers, there is simply not enough time or energy to accomplish both.

## **3. Considering exceptions to the rule**

One of the unfortunate, underlying messages of grammar textbooks is that English communication and grammar can be simplified to a rule. One of the most advantageous aspects of this integration of supplying authentic data as well as textbook data, is the interaction between what is perceived as a grammar rule and how the usage either supports or refutes it. Moreover, the 'clean' usages in the text can be used as a looking glass to perceive the real usages. They are simply a step on the path to the communicative activity.

The challenge is, of course, to help teachers come to accept that English grammar is not a simply a system of rules and regulations, but much more fluid and 'emergent' (to borrow Hopper's term). Once this change in mindset occurs, teachers can begin to hold less tightly to the rule. A systematic set of rules and regulations, in which one sentence is always right and another is always wrong, is much simpler and easier to teach. It is the difference between whether or not something can or cannot be said, rather than what is or is not said.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

In this article, a DDL model has been applied to a real-world high school situations with the goal of creating a curriculum that is, at the same time, communication and authentic text

based, but also fulfils the needs to the Japanese high school teacher to prepare students sufficiently for the looming university entrance examinations. Acknowledging that the textbook is a standard and important part of the high school EFL landscape, this methodology takes a moderate approach by implementing activities that are data-driven while using the textbook as final step in the learning process. The result is a process that works from language to the rules rather than vice-versa.

For teachers wishing to use DDL activities in their classrooms, challenges certainly are present. Taking time to prepare new approaches and convince colleagues that time spent studying corpora is time well spent is by no means a small task. Additionally, it may be difficult to convince school administrators that DDL approaches or communication-based activities are worth the time of preparation. On the other hand, if students are able to learn the same rules, but, at the same time, use English to accomplish the goals of classroom activities, sceptics might find it difficult to stand in the way of these kinds of approaches. If the goals are achieved and student's proficiency is also improving, there will certainly be fewer obstacles to the teacher seeking to implement these methods on a larger scale. By taking small steps, teachers can begin to move their classrooms forward.

Implementing a DDL approach to learning in high school in a system-wide change might best also be approached in increments. It seems important that leaders of schools (particularly vice-principals and boards of education) begin to see the value of DDL approaches in the classroom. If individual teachers are able to show results in individual classrooms, school administrators may be more likely to support a DDL approach in on a wider scale. This will take courage and patience on the part of teachers who might meet resistance to their methodology and support among teachers who share the same the ideology of pedagogic grammar.

In the end, whether or not the grammar textbook should or should not have a role in the Japanese high school classroom might not be the best question to ask. A measured approach, with a strong understanding of the politics of teaching English in Japan might be the best hope for a system-wide change. There is certainly cause for a cautious optimism given the Ministry of Education's statement on English education in Japan and the native teacher presence in many high school classrooms. Using methodologies like the ones presented in this paper and by carefully implementing advances in EFL pedagogy seen in research, while not ignoring the needs of students, teachers can use discretion to moderate their practice. The goal of communicative English based on authentic texts and usage can then begin to be realized.

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