

Blind Spots in the Japanese Junior and Senior High School English Language Syllabus: a Preliminary Survey

Introduction and First Report*

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1 Introduction

1.1 Opening remarks

In recent years there have been many excellent analyses of English language teaching methods in Japan. There has also been a large number of fruitful studies relating to foreign language learning, learner aptitude, learning strategies and the significance of learners' errors. Although these inquiries have yielded results of undoubted value, it is not my primary concern here to add to their number.

What I should like to do in this survey is to take from the point of view of a university English teacher a broad overview of the Japanese junior high school and senior high school English language syllabus as it is taught at present, and to focus not on "method", "aptitude" or "strategy", but on the single unfashionable topic of "content". In doing so, I should like to suggest that if there is in fact room for improving English language teaching and learning processes in Japan, then there may also be room for improving *what* is actually taught and learnt; that what is taught in junior and senior high schools in Japan in this age of burgeoning international communication is still not sufficient, both in quantity and in quality, to give the Japanese student an all round grasp of the English language (let alone culture), and that this probably remains true regardless of the methods by which the language is imparted, the ability of the student, or the learning strategies invoked.

In contrast to English language teaching methodology, which in many ways is as progressive as one could hope for, the content — the actual English that is being taught in Japan at the moment — is not keeping up with the times, is not keeping pace with the needs of modern international communication. The upshot is that certain crucially important areas of the modern spoken language are not being taught, or if they are, are evidently not being given the necessary

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weight in the foreign language curriculum as a whole, with the result that they are quite forgotten by the time the students reach the first year of university. It is these important but untaught / under-taught / forgotten areas of the language that I term here, for the sake of convenience, “blind spots”.

1.2 Approach

The number of these blind spots is very large. Indeed there are so many of them, and they occur so randomly across the retina of linguistic vision — be they semantic, syntactic, phonetic or even orthographic (!) — that it is well nigh impossible to deal with all of them together and bring them into any semblance of rational order. Given this fact, any attempt to do so is bound to present a fragmentary, not to say arbitrary appearance. What I therefore propose to do in this and following reports is simply to list the examples that I have been gathering from junior high school, senior high school and university students in Kagoshima, and pose the open question “Is there a pattern? Do these blind spots have any linguistic characteristic in common?” If it turns out that they indeed do, then it will be evident that a more detailed look at this field is called for. It may incidentally follow that there will be implications for other areas of language teaching methodology and/or learning analyses, though, as I have said, that is not the principal concern of this paper.

1.3 Scope

For this first report, I have restricted the scope of attention to one loose but easily definable area; easily definable, that is, from the traditional syntactic-grammatical point of view: that of verbs and adverbs. The three sections presented here cover problematical uses of tense (present progressive for future time, simple present for custom and occupation, greetings in the perfect, and habitual past behaviour with *used to*), verbals (the existential *there*, request making, *have got*, mistake editing and verification, and onomatopoeia), and adverbials (*else*, *possibly* etc, *not very*, and request answering).

All these items will be seen to have their greatest significance in spoken conversation, and there is a strong bias towards the question and answer process. This is both inevitable, and, it is hoped, of practical use for future reference at the junior high school and senior high school level. Problems which occur only in written, non-conversational styles, though many, are not included in this study, but of course many of the items evident from the spoken language will also be relevant in greater or lesser degree to the written.

In future articles, I hope to report on blind spots in syntactical categories such as interjections, prepositions, articles, number, nouns and adjectives; notional categories such as

agreement/disagreement and certainty/uncertainty; and phonetic categories such as stress, intonation, liaison and reduction.

1.4 Classification

It will immediately be seen that in listing the blind spots I have avoided strict division according to any one consistent system of linguistic categorization. Indeed, for the purposes of this first report, I have tentatively grouped otherwise disparate items under deliberately imprecise headings. It would be premature at this stage to attempt a precise, monolithic classification of all the items given when the causes of the underlying problems of which they are but a surface representation are obviously so diverse.

1.5 References

References in square brackets are to publications of a theoretical, academic or lexicographic nature, such as Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartik's *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, e.g. [Quirk 4.44]. Those in round brackets are to textbooks of English as a foreign language, such as Bernard Hartley and Peter Viney's *Streamline English Departures*, e.g. (*S. E. D.* 23.1). Often, especially in the latter case, only the earliest or most important appearance of an item is noted, the first number referring to the numbered unit, the second to the paragraph, section or model conversation within the unit. A full bibliography will be given at the end of each report.

2 First Report

2.1 The use of tense

2.1.1 The use of the present progressive to refer to the future

[Quirk 4.44] [Thomson 1.70]

(*S. E. D.* 23.1) (*Discoveries* 2 31.5) (*E.F.* 3)

In modern colloquial English the present progressive is a major means of referring to the anticipated future with a personal subject. Consider the following example:

a) A: I'm busy on Saturday.

B: What are you doing?

A: I'm doing my homework. (*S. E. D.* 23.1)

The "blind spot" here arises because this usage is not taught in Japan. As a result Japanese students, even English majors at university, nearly always assume that the present progressive form refers only to the present time, and thus misunderstand the temporal aspect of these

elementary sentences. In other words, they mistakenly assume that "A" is doing her homework now.

Here are some more examples of this use of the present progressive to refer to the future:

- b) Where is he going on Sunday?
- c) She's coming home tomorrow.
- d) What are you doing tonight? (*E. F.* 3)

The following example can refer to the present or to the near future:

- e) What are you doing now?

This can mean either "What are you doing at this moment in time?" or "What are you planning to do from now?" In a casual conversation between native speakers the latter is often the more sensible interpretation, as in (f):

- f) A: What are you doing now?
B: I'm going home.

Discoveries, like *Streamline*, and indeed most other EFL textbooks, introduces this use of the present progressive long before the *will* future:

- g) A: What are you doing after school?
B: I'm meeting my mother and going shopping. (*Discoveries* 2 31.5)

Unfortunately the Japanese, when speaking English, nearly always use *will/shall* (usually *will*) to refer to the future. The problem here is that the use of *will/shall* is much less common than the Japanese (and indeed many English grammarians) seem to have realized, and in the case of anticipation or planning, as in all the examples in this section, *will* would sound very awkward indeed. Consider the following doubtful example:

- h) A: I will be busy on Saturday.
B: What will you do?
A: I will do my homework.

Though none of these sentences is unacceptable on its own, the overall effect is comic. It does not sound like a conversation between native speakers. (The future progressive *will be doing* does not greatly improve the effect.) It is beyond the scope of this article to explain why this use of *will* creates such an unnatural atmosphere; suffice it to say that in the anticipated future with a personal subject, the present progressive (including, of course, *be going to*) is the natural and dominant form, whereas *will* is unnatural, particularly in conversation. Quirk [4.44] fails to make this point sufficiently clear.

