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.

2.1.2 The timeless/habitual form of the verb

[Quirk 4.6; 19.42 [3]]

(*S. E. D.* 34, 37) (*E. F.* 1) (*S. E. C.* 1)

The fact that the simple present very often refers to time other than the present is taught in junior and senior high schools but is easily forgotten by university students. Perhaps a change of terminology might reduce the confusion?

a) A: Do you wear a uniform?
   B: No, I don't. (*S. E. D.* 34)

This exchange does not refer to present time but to habit/custom.

The contrast between the habitual and the progressive is important:

b) She dances for the Royal Ballet.
   She isn't dancing now. (*S. E. D.* 37)

The same form of the verb is also commonly used for enquiring about someone's profession / occupation:

c) A: What do you do? (*E. F.* 1) (*S. E. C.* 1)
   B: I'm a teacher.

d) D: Do you sing?
   E: No, I'm a pianist.

This extremely useful formula is rarely taught in Japanese junior and senior high schools. Some of my students have told me they were taught to say "What are you?" when asking about someone's occupation. This is more likely to provoke the indignant retort, "I'm a human being!"

2.1.3 The present perfect for greeting a friend

Although *How are you?* is well known in Japan, *How have you been? / How've you been?* is a blind spot. *How have you been?* is a useful and extremely common conversational gambit, probably almost as common as *How are you?* and corresponds very closely to the Japanese *ogenki deshita ka.* Nevertheless, it invariably provokes blank stares in Japan. The following is a selection of possible replies:

a) Very well, thanks.

b) I've been very well, thank you.

c) I've been very busy.

d) I've been working twelve hours a day. (*S. E. D.* 40, 42)

2.1.4 Habitual behaviour in the past: *used to*

[Quirk 3.44; 4.57 (a3)]

(*S. E. C.* 36)

When describing habitual behaviour in the past, Japanese university students often use *would*. However, "this use of *would* is rather more formal than the equivalent use of *used to*, and unlike *used to*, needs to be associated with a time indicator" [Quirk 4.57 (a3)]. I would go even further than Quirk, and suggest that *would* has a distinctly literary feel to it and is not appropriate in a conversational context. *It was my custom to* and like phrases are even worse. Such phrases are entirely absent from *Streamline* and other English oral/aural textbooks, whereas *used to* receives extensive coverage in all.

a) He often used to search the truck, but he never found anything. (*S. E. C.* 36)

b) I used to be, but I'm not any more. (*S. E. C.* 36)

Used to often corresponds with the colloquial adverbial use of *mukashi (wa)* or *yoku . . . shita* and, I suggest, should be taught as such, rather than as a translation for the rarely used *shita mono da*. In this connection see the excellent section on *used to*[1] in the *Shōgakkan Random House English-Japanese Dictionary*.

The Japanese often use adverbs such as "before" to define time. In English such adverbs are often superfluous and may be stylistically inept; it is far more important to get the tense/aspect right. "I was a student before" is ungainly English, and can in certain circumstances be misleading. The natural English in most situations is "I *used to* be a student."

2.2 Verbs and verbal phrases

2.2.1 Existential sentences: *there is/was* etc.

[Quirk 18.46]

(*S. E. D.* 6, passim) (*E. F.* 5)

In spoken English, Japanese students at all levels often omit the existential *there*, or replace it with *it*. They also regularly fail to hear *there* when it is spoken at natural speed. Another major problem noticed by foreign English language teachers in Japan is that the Japanese will refuse to begin a sentence until they can "see" what is at the end. This problem is particularly noticeable with *there* existential constructions. The obvious root of this problem, apart from a lack of training, is that in these constructions what comes at the end of the English sentence must come first in the native language.

It is also often forgotten that *there* can be used with other tenses/aspects than the simple present:

a) There were ... = ... ga arimashita.

b) There may be. = Aru ka mo shiremasen.

c) There wouldn't have been. = Nakatta (deshō/no ni *etc.*)

etc.

The root of the problem may be that although *there is* is taught at an elementary stage, it is not made clear, when the past and other tenses are taught, that *there is* is subject to the same rules as other verbs. This is compounded by an acute lack of oral/aural reinforcement.

2.2.2 Request making: *Can you ... ? / Could you ... ?*

[Quirk 4.63 (c) (II), 4.52 note [a]] [Cassell 10.8.2; 8.6] [Thomson 1.1; 96] [Hughes 1.2.4] (*S. E. D.* 7.2) (*Spectrum 1*) (*Gambits*) (*Discoveries 2*) (*S. D.*) (*S. E.*)

One of the most common forms of making a request in English makes no formal appearance in the syllabus, and so is rarely given the attention it deserves. It is for this reason that I have given it prominence in *Dialogues*. In other textbooks written by English speakers it features even more prominently: in *Streamline* it appears no later than unit seven in the first book; in the American textbook, *Spectrum*, it appears on the very first page.

a) C: Mrs Connor, could you pass the salt please?

D: Certainly. (*S. E. D.* 7.2)

b) Could you spell your last name, please? (*Spectrum 1* 1.c)

Spectrum explain their policy thus:

> Grammar is carefully graded throughout the series. However, more difficult structures may be introduced *formulaically* when they are needed to perform a given function appropriately. In level 1, students learn expressions such as *Could you spell your last name?* and *May I take a message?*, although the modals *could* and *may* are not analyzed systematically until the intermediate level. In the advanced level, the same structures are expanded further. (*Spectrum 1* Introduction)

The Canadian *Gambits: Openers* also encourages extensive use of *could* in phrases such as *Could you tell me* (*Openers* 1.B); and in *Survival English*, *could* features prominently in the units entitled *Permission* and *Request*. Indeed *could you ... ?* is the very first sentence to be treated by *Survival English*, appearing as it does in the top left hand corner of the front cover. *Can you ... ?* and *Could you ... ?* also appear in the very first unit of *Situational Dialogues*. *Cassell's Students' English Grammar* gives us the following advice:

> *Can you ... ?* and, more politely, *could you ... ?* are common ways of making a request. [10.8.2]

> When talking to people you do not know well, or people you need to be polite to, soften the imperative with a form such as "Would you ... ?" or "Could you ... ?" [8.6]

Yet, in spite of this plethora of advice and encouragement, the Japanese still do not teach a popular and well-documented formula for making requests.

One Japanese writer who has noticed the problem is Kunizō Ōsugi, the index of whose *Eigo no Kei-i Hyōgen* lists no fewer than 23 entries under *Can/Could you (I) ... ?* Even Ōsugi, however, seems to be under the impression that *Could you ... ?* is a polite, "deferential" expression of only limited use. That this is not so is shown by the following example taken from *Discoveries 2:*

c) Oh, Mum, could you turn off the light ... ? (*Discoveries 2* 37)

This is a request from a fourteen or fifteen year old girl to her mother; very far removed from the sort of situation where deferential/honorific language is required in Japanese. *Could you ... ?* is a perfectly ordinary method of making a friendly request in a normal, casual situation.

Here are some more examples of *Can/Could you ... ?* taken from EFL textbooks written by native English language speakers:

d) Can you spare a minute? (*Gambits O*3)

e) Can you repeat that please? (*Gambits R*28)

f) Can you tell me where South Street is, please? (*S. D.* 1.i)

g) Could you say that again? (*Gambits R*25,30) (*Survival. Request* ii B)

h) Could you share with Anne today. (Hughes 1.2.4)

i) Could you give these sheets out, please. (Hughes 1.2.5)

The range of meaning in Japanese extends from the casual *shite! / shite kurenai?* to the more formal *shite kudasai.*

Will you ... ? though sometimes used, can be seen as presuming on another's willingness, and is therefore increasingly rarely used as a general request form. In this capacity it has already been superseded by *Can/Could you ... ?* *Would you ... ?* is still common as a more polite form. *Would you be so kind as to ... ?* is "very formal and rarely used" (*Survival English. Request* i A).

2.2.3 *Have got*

[Quirk 3.34; 3.48; 4.55] [Thomson 1.1]

(*S. E. D.* 16,17, passim) (*Gambits C*36) (*E. F.* 2)

Since the majority of British English speakers and an increasing number of Americans now use *have got* as an alternative to, or, in some cases, in preference to the stative *have,* it is imperative that both of these forms be taught.

a) i He's got a car. Have you got a car? Yes, I have / No, I haven't.
What have you got?

ii He has a car. Do you have a car? Yes, I do / No, I don't.
What do you have?

Have got is also used as an alternative to *have* in the following by both the British and Americans.

b) I've got to see someone. (*Gambits C* 36)

c) You've got to be joking. [Quirk 3.48 note [a]]

Japanese university students have usually read about these forms and often understand them visually, but nearly always fail to understand when *have got* is used orally.

2.2.4 Mistake editing and verification: *I mean .../You mean ... ?/What do you mean?*

[Quirk 17.80]

(*Dialogues* 1, passim)

Both mistake editing and verification are crucially important conversational functions, which become absolutely indispensable if one wishes to have successful communication in a foreign language. In English, one simple verb, *to mean*, fulfils a very felicitous role here, and is easy to teach at the beginner level.

a) When was your funeral, *I mean* wedding? (mistake editing)

b) You mean my wedding? (verification)

c) What do you mean?

d) What does ... mean?

Both this use of *I mean* and the other uses of the verb *to mean* are extremely useful in "keeping the conversation going" even among native speakers. *I mean* corresponds to the Japanese *...janakute* ... or ...*Shitsurei*..., whereas *You mean* ... ? corresponds to *Tsumari*... *to iu koto desu ka/ to iu imi desu ka/ no koto desu ka*?

Japanese speakers of English who have not had practice in English mistake editing are often to be heard using the Japanese equivalents *Shitsurei* or *ja nakute* sotto voce in the middle of English sentences (*Dialogues* p4).

2.2.5 Onomatopoetic verbs

[Jorden] [Mito] [Ono]

This whole area is ignored by both Japanese textbooks and those written by native English speakers, with the result that many Japanese students are led to believe that there is no onomatopoeia in English. The root of the problem is that whereas in Japanese it is usually the