

# Noticing: developing grammar awareness in the teaching of English at Japanese high schools

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journal or publication title	The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies
volume	19
page range	347-366
year	2007-03-31
URL	<a href="http://id.nii.ac.jp/1092/00001229/">http://id.nii.ac.jp/1092/00001229/</a>

# **Noticing: Developing Grammar Awareness in the Teaching of English at Japanese High Schools.**

Robert MacIntyre

Most Japanese students start to study English at the age of twelve and they continue until they graduate from high school or university. Recently, the emphasis in English education has been on helping the students to communicate and efforts have been made to change the syllabus to facilitate this. However, whilst there is a general feeling that change is necessary the debate has had little effect on the teaching methods that are used to teach English in high schools. This paper aims to describe the syllabus and by evaluating it suggest ways that it could be adapted and developed to help in the teaching of grammar.

## **Description and evaluation of the course.**

In 1994 the Japanese Ministry of Education (Mombusho) introduced the new Course of Study Guidelines (Mombusho, 1994) that, for the first time, emphasised the development of a student's communicative ability in English as a primary goal. The students were to (1) acquire the basic ability to express themselves in English, (2) become motivated to communicate in English, and (3) become interested in language and culture. To aid in this the curriculum was altered and three new Oral Communication courses were added. First

year high school students are required to take a general English course and in addition choose from six other courses: general English II, reading, writing, Oral Communication A (speaking), Oral Communication B (listening) and Oral Communication C (speech and debate). The syllabus is skills-based and, in theory; the four skills (i.e. listening, speaking, reading and writing) are to be taught equally (Katayama et al, 1994).

However, although the new Oral Communication classes are a positive step, the reality is that such courses are infrequently taught. Browne and Wada (1998, 107-108) report that teachers are reluctant to teach them because of the lack of training in these disciplines and their lack of confidence in speaking English. Their survey results showed that in Oral Communication classes teachers used English for 30-40% of the duration of a typical 50-minute lesson. If the aim is to increase students' ability to communicate then more needs to be done to increase the confidence of these teachers so that more English is used and the students are given every opportunity to communicate in English.

The aim to motivate learners to communicate in English is dealt a fundamental blow by the way in which the students are evaluated. Central to the high-school system are two entrance examinations: one is from junior high school to high school and the other is from high school to university. Competition to get into the best high school or university is fierce and because of the format of these tests they have a negative backwash effect on the classroom. The tests consist of discrete-point questions that assess the candidates' knowledge of the English grammar system. This puts enormous pressure on the teachers to prepare their students for these exams, which leads to a reliance on the grammar-translation method in the classroom. The

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textbooks are designed to reinforce grammar and the learners, who want to go to a good university, have little motivation to want to communicate because it will not help them in the future. These exams are therefore a barrier to the Ministry of Education's aims and in order for change to occur they would need to reassess the way in which students are evaluated.

In their survey, Browne and Wada (1998, 101) reported that between 63-75% of the teachers they asked majored in English Literature. They go on to say how, in most cases, these prospective English teachers are not required to take any additional courses in second language acquisition, methodology and techniques. This potential lack of knowledge makes it more likely that these teachers adopt a grammar-translation method as it is more teacher-fronted and does not require the teacher to communicate in English. Such teachers, constrained by an approach whose goal is to improve students' grammar, are perhaps less likely to experiment with new techniques.

In 1987 the Japanese government created the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) programme. This sent native speakers of foreign languages (predominantly English) into junior and senior high school classrooms to assist with foreign language teaching. In the year 2001/2002 the government hope to hire around 8400 new teachers (MEXT, 2002, 5) and together with the current teachers this amounts to a significant number who have an impact on the educational system. These teachers, trained in different approaches and methods, could provide the innovation and knowledge to motivate the students and introduce techniques that are more up-to-date with current thinking on second language acquisition. However, the role of the native speaker teacher has not been clearly defined and they are often under utilised. In the skill-based syllabus that is used the native speakers are mainly used in the communication

classes but they have much to offer in other skill areas. This is improving as team teaching is developed and the Japanese teachers become more confident about interacting with a foreign teacher but more needs to be done to explore the potential of this partnership.

One of the main problems in the teaching of English in Japan is the material that the teachers have to use. Although, the stated aims of the government seem to indicate that they support communicative language teaching the textbooks that they issue, that the teachers must use, are based around the grammar translation method. This, as has been mentioned previously, is caused by the entrance exam system and it stops the teachers from exploring new methods and using more authentic and, possibly, interesting material. From my own research (MacIntyre, 2003) when I questioned Japanese students who had graduated from high school several of them mentioned the motivating experience of using authentic material. Dornyei (1998, 117) argued that, ‘motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process’. If the government wish to motivate their students to learn they need to consider the role of the examination and provide materials that motivate the learners and fulfil the learners’ needs.

### **‘Noticing’: a suggested development for materials’ design.**

Ideally, the most productive way of changing the Japanese educational syllabus would be to adapt the university entrance examination. If it could be changed to make it a more communicative assessment with a wider emphasis on all four skills it could provide a positive backwash effect that would

force changes in the curriculum. The grammar-translation method with its concentration on form would have to be changed to a multi-skills syllabus that encouraged a communicative approach. However, the entrance exam is so deeply embedded in the system that, unfortunately, it is very difficult to change so a way needs to be found to teach the grammar system but to make the teaching methods more up-to-date with current second language research and more motivating to students. One idea, which has been discussed in recent literature (Carter, 2001; Ellis, 1997; Thornbury, 1999), is ‘noticing’ or ‘grammar consciousness-raising.’

## **I. Noticing.**

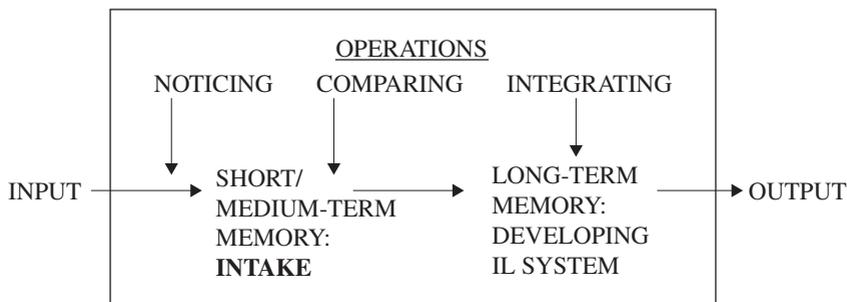
Schmidt and Frota (1986, quoted in Thornbury, 1997, 326) suggested that two kinds of noticing are necessary conditions for acquisition:

- 1) Learners must attend to linguistic features of the input that they are exposed to, without which input cannot become ‘intake’.
- 2) Learners must ‘notice the gap’, i.e. make comparisons between the current state of their developing linguistic system, as realised in their output, and the target language system, available as input.

The teacher by focusing the learners’ attention on the target language and by having them compare this input with the present state of their interlanguage can facilitate the process of acquisition.

In Ellis’s model of second language acquisition (see Page 6) ‘noticing’ plays an important role in the acquisition process. Ellis (1997,119) suggested three stages after which input can become implicit knowledge.

1. **Noticing** (i.e. paying attention to specific linguistic features in the input).
2. **Comparing** (i.e. comparing the noticed features with the features the learner typically produces in output).
3. **Integrating** (i.e. constructing new hypotheses in order to incorporate the noticed features into the interlanguage system).



In the context of the Japanese educational system ‘noticing’ activities could have the dual effect of promoting language acquisition and aiding the learner’s ability to explain how forms function; a consciousness-raising activity that would help raise the students awareness of English grammar. However, this would be quite a radical shift in methodology and the teachers would need help in designing tasks that would promote the process. Scott Thornbury (1997, 327) suggests, ‘tasks that provide opportunities for noticing are ones that, even if essentially meaning-focussed, allow the learner to devote some attentional resources to form, and, moreover, provide both the data and the incentive for the learner to make comparisons between interlanguage output and target language models.’ This could support a text-based approach to language and a reconstruction activity (See Appendix A).

## **II. The material.**

This task is designed for a standard fifty-minute lesson for learners in senior high school aged between fifteen and sixteen. The text is from an Internet site that is aimed at foreign people living in Japan. It is authentic and the vocabulary is difficult but it should be suitable for this age group who will have been studying English for around four years. One sentence was taken out because the vocabulary was too difficult but its omission does not interfere with the cohesion and meaning of the text.

This text was chosen because it is authentic and whilst the vocabulary is challenging there are several words of Japanese origin that will help the students. As discussed earlier one of the aims of the syllabus is to interest the students in language and culture and this topic seems to fit these criteria. It could also provide some useful follow-up discussion as it is concerned with a foreign person's interpretation of Japanese cultural activities. The teacher could use these opinions to compare and contrast these ideas with the perceptions of the Japanese students.

Step 1 is a pre-reading exercise that aims to get the students to predict some of the vocabulary contained in the text. Nuttall (1996, 13) argued that, 'prediction is important because it activates schemata: that is it calls into mind any experiences and associated knowledge that we already have about the topic of the text...If the relevant schemata are activated, ready for use, we can understand the text more easily. Activated schemata are also more readily available to be modified by new ideas from the text: in other words, we shall learn better.' It is therefore important that the teacher maximises the potential of this stage and in association with Step 2 establishes that the students have

the requisite knowledge without which any discussion of the target language would be very difficult.

Step 3 is the stage where the focus is shifted from meaning to form and this is consolidated by the reconstruction exercise in Step 4. This, in theory, is the *noticing* stage as the students compare their version with the model and bring to attention the gap between their present knowledge and the target structures thereby converting input to intake.

The final step attempts to personalise the activity by asking the students their opinions of the themes explored in the text. Here, this is just to set-up the homework activity but this could be expanded in a subsequent lesson as a speaking activity that discusses culture. However, the writing task that is assigned for their homework is to assess whether the students can produce the appropriate forms in context. This task gives the students more time to think and reinforces the language awareness exercises contained in the lesson.

### **III. The learner.**

The role of the learner is different with this material, as they become active participants in the learning process as opposed to passive receivers of knowledge. Although, they cannot necessarily choose their own material they have more freedom to discuss the language than during the teacher-centred lessons of the grammar translation method. To refer back to Ellis's model the learners have the opportunity to notice the language, compare it with their present level and integrate it into their interlanguage system. It is important that the learners are given the time to adapt to this new role but once they have it will be a more motivating experience that should encourage students

to develop their knowledge of English.

As has been stated earlier the primary extrinsic need of the learners is to develop knowledge of the English grammar system that will enable them to achieve a good grade on the university entrance exam. At present, the materials that are being used do attempt to fulfil this need but they do so at the expense of the students' main intrinsic need, which is to enjoy what they are doing and get motivation from the task. The material that has been designed could provide a solution to the problem by teaching grammar and maintaining the interest of the learners. It uses authentic material that introduces a topic that the students are aware of and can relate to. From talking to Japanese high school students they often find the materials they are taught uninteresting and not relevant to their lives. If topics can be found to engage their interest learning English would, perhaps, be a more motivating experience.

#### **IV. The syllabus.**

The educational aims of the government are essentially communicative so it is interesting that the syllabus is not. There have been attempts to make it more so by including communication classes but, generally, it is difficult to classify. Although, the syllabus is organised by skills: reading, writing, speaking etc., they are used as a vehicle for teaching grammar. The students could choose lessons that provide them with more opportunity to communicate in English but they are aware of the looming entrance exam and pick the options that will prepare them best for this grammar-centred assessment. The material that has been suggested would fit into this syllabus in the General English class.

At present, in General English classes, Japanese students are taught from a

book that contains texts that illustrate a particular grammar point. The students read the text in class and then answer some practice questions relating to that grammar. The material that has been designed could be taught in this lesson. However, where as now each element of the syllabus has a separate text and the units are not related more effort could be made to integrate various topics. The ‘noticing’ text could be used to teach the grammar but the topic of culture could be used to generate other lessons. For example, a writing task where the students e-mail a learner from a different country or a speaking task where they compare their culture to those of other countries. The topics could provide a context for the learning situation and together with the authentic materials would provide more ‘real’ examples of the language.

## **V. The teachers.**

In terms of their ability to design their own syllabuses the teachers role will not change with this new material. They will still have to follow the syllabus that the government decides for them but they will have more freedom in teaching it. They will be using a textbook, which contains tasks that will enable them to evaluate a learners’ progress and establish the students’ needs. By using this information they can alter the course to suit their learners and instead of taking a passive role will be more actively involved in the educational experience. This expanded role could give the teachers more confidence as they have more control over their work.

The new material does bare certain similarities with that used in the present syllabus: they are both text-based and concerned with grammar. However, the teaching methodologies are very different and this is why it is so important

that the teachers are given adequate training in what to them will be a totally new approach. There would be a danger that if the training were not sufficient they would use the new material but teach it through the grammar-translation method. This would negate the potential positive effects of the new material and be a backward step in terms of syllabus development.

The material teaches the learners to be more aware of language; it's form and it's meaning, and this experience needs to be paralleled by trainee teachers. In their article, Wright and Bolitho (1993, 292) talk about language awareness being the missing link in teacher education and that, 'a linguistically-aware teacher will be in a strong and secure position to accomplish various tasks-preparing lessons; evaluating, adapting, and writing materials; understanding, interpreting, and ultimately designing a syllabus or curriculum; testing and assessing learners' performance; and contributing to English language work across the curriculum.' If the teachers are made linguistically aware and transmit this knowledge to their students it will help to develop the syllabus and further the debate as to the efficacy of the current teaching methods.

The use of L1 by the teachers is also an interesting issue. As suggested earlier during English lessons Japanese teachers often use their native tongue to make explanations in lessons. However, Ellis (1998, 49) argued that, 'if consciousness-raising tasks are performed in groups and the target language is used as the medium for solving the problems they pose, the tasks double as communicative tasks. Learners can as well talk about grammar as talk about any other topic.' This suggests that Japanese teachers need to be encouraged to use English more in their lessons but they will only do so if they have been given the confidence to do so by their training. A balance would need to be struck between maximising the use of the target language and the teaching

of the language. If the material is taught using the suggested method and the students understand the message is it a problem if the teachers use their mother tongue to aid their students? This is something not dealt with in this assignment but it would be interesting to research the effects on the students of the use of L1 and L2 by the teachers during a ‘noticing’ task.

## **VI. Evaluation.**

At present, the evaluation system is based around two entrance examinations: from junior high school to senior high school and from high school to university. These are high stakes tests using discrete-point questions that assess the candidates’ knowledge of the English grammar system. The students are tested throughout their education and these tests are designed to prepare them for the entrance exams. They follow the same format and the content is similar. Such tests put a lot of pressure on students who need to get a high-score to go to a ‘good’ university and boost their career opportunities. Although, the entrance examinations are so firmly entrenched in the educational system that they would be difficult to change, perhaps, an alternative method of evaluation could be used during high school that assesses the students’ grammar but that does not cause so much anxiety.

The change in teaching methods away from grammar-translation to an approach that encourages a more holistic awareness of language could encourage a more formative assessment. The teacher could carry out assessment as a routine part of the teaching and learning process. For example, the task (Appendix A) has a homework assignment where the students have to use what they have just learned to write a short piece about traditional Japanese

activities. The teacher could use this homework as a means of diagnostic assessment and by focusing on the learners' specific strengths and weaknesses could prioritise the students' needs and tailor their lessons accordingly. This in turn could have a positive motivational impact on the students because it personalises the assessment procedure rather than the usual summative assessment that is imposed on them by an outside body.

Where as it is the case that formative assessment could be beneficial to the students it would not change the fact that their primary educational need is to get a good grade in the summative test at the end of their high school education. A balance would therefore need to be struck between the formative testing and preparing the students for this end of year exam. However, by identifying the students' short term educational needs the teachers would, hopefully, help the students awareness of the language which is arguably of more long-term educational significance than answering discrete grammatical questions.

## **Conclusion.**

The development that I have suggested is a compromise between the need for change in the syllabus and the environment in which it exists. Ideally, the university entrance exam would be changed to make it more communicative which would have a backwash effect on the syllabus. This change to a more communicative approach would help to achieve the stated aims of the government and the educational culture would alter to make it more up-to-date with current theory on second language acquisition. However, a radical shift in policy, such as this, is not likely and any change in the syllabus needs to take into account the reality of the situation. A more gradual change in the

teaching materials and the methods by which they are taught is not as radical as a complete revision of the curriculum but it could allow a balance to be maintained between development and the status quo.

The ‘noticing’ task suggested is one way of adapting the syllabus whilst keeping this equilibrium. However, a proviso needs to be added. The idea of ‘noticing’ is still relatively new and the hypothesis has been criticised. Truscott (1998, 110) argues that, ‘the foundations of the Noticing Hypothesis are weak. Cognitive research does not support the claim that conscious awareness of the information to be acquired is necessary or helpful.’ There is also an argument that whilst such tasks do help to improve a students’ metalinguistic knowledge that there is no evidence to suggest it helps them acquire any actual knowledge of the language. ‘Noticing’ is therefore not necessarily the ‘right’ solution or the ‘only’ solution for this problem but by investigating it’s effects on Japanese learners the debate would be furthered and more evidence acquired.

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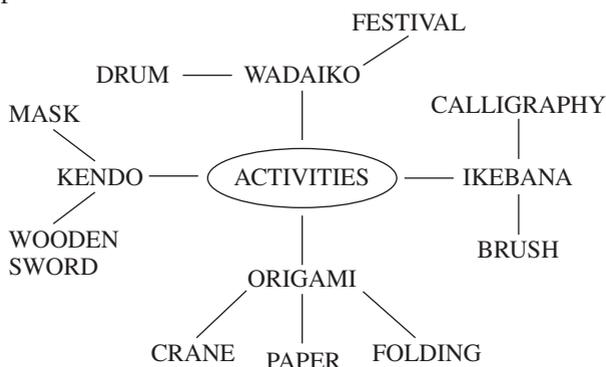
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## APPENDIX A: GRAMMAR TASK.

### Teacher's notes.

1. Before handing out the text, 'Touch of Class' write the heading and subheading on the board. Explain to the students that the article is from a website that is designed for foreign people living in Japan and that this article is concerned with traditional Japanese activities. Ask the students to think of some activities that they think the article will discuss and vocabulary items that are associated with them. The students call them out and a mind-map is built up on the board.

For example:



Brainstorm as much vocabulary as you can and feed in words from the text that are important but that the students did not mention. **(10 minutes)**

Ask the students to read the texts silently and to answer these four questions:

- a) Which is the most widely known of Japanese crafts?
- b) What size are *taiko drums*?
- c) What is *hanshi*?
- d) Is *origami* the art of making paper cranes?

Allow 5 minutes for the students to answer the questions and then to check their answers in pairs. Check the answers in open class. **(10 minutes)**.

2. Write these two sentences from the text on the board:

**Its two distinct forms are moribana, in which flowers are arranged in flat containers with a large water surface area...**

**Far from being strictly about paper cranes, *origami* is a complex art whose creations can be stunning.**

Underline the adjectives and adverbs in the sentences on the board and look at the first example, **distinct**. Ask the students for the word that it describes. Elicit **forms** and ask the students what type of word it is. Explain to the students that an adjective is a word that describes a noun.

Repeat this process with **strictly** and then explain that this is an adverb and that it describes a verb.

Have the students underline all the adjectives and adverbs in the text. Then with their partner check their answers and discuss which word it is that they describe.

**(15 minutes)**.

3. Tell the students to close their books and, working in pairs, ask the students to reconstruct the *Wadaiko* passage from memory. They can then check their versions with the original. **(10 minutes)**.
4. Ask the students what they think of the activities that are discussed in the texts. Are they interesting, boring etc? For homework ask them to chose one of the activities and write what they think about it. **(5 minutes)**.

## TOUCH OF CLASS

Banging drums and folding paper can open new windows into Japanese culture. Here's a guide to traditional instruction in Tokyo.

### Ikebana

Perhaps the most widely known of the Japanese crafts, ikebana is experiencing something of a boom. Its two distinct forms are moribana, in which flowers are arranged in flat containers with a large water surface area, and heika, which uses tall vases with small openings. Moribana (literally, “piling up flowers” is typically studied by beginners, and it features a main flower, or shin, surrounded by stems or other flowers whose orientation can be upright (chokutai), slanting (shatai) or cascading (suitai). While ikebana basics are easily grasped, the nuances of varying colors, shapes, lengths and textures means limitless combinations and opportunities for delight.

### Wadaiko



Traditional Japanese drumming, or wadaiko, provides the soundtrack for summer festivals like Bon Odori, Matsuri, and the portable shrine parade known as Mikoshi. Taiko drums are made from wood and cow hide, and they

range in size from tiny bongos beat with hands to huge timpanis that must be supported by stands. Because taiko is all about rhythm, it's perfect for the Japan newbie who's musically inclined but whose language skills aren't up to snuff. Be prepared to sweat, though: lessons often begin with some fairly simple rhythms, and as they progress the patterns increase in difficulty.

## **Calligraphy**

Known as shodo, calligraphy came from China 1,500 years ago and thrives today as a vital art form emblematic of Japan's grace and elegance. Mastering calligraphy requires careful and devoted study, and it's a skill required of all Japanese schoolchildren. Basic materials include a special handcrafted paper called hanshi, which rests on a soft backing mat called a shitajiki and is held down by a bunchin, two brushes—one thin and one thick—known as fude, and a hardened ink called sumi that's mixed with water in a suzuri. Proper technique involves learning proper stroke order, being consistent with the amount of ink used, varying the thickness and thinness of lines, and producing a pleasing balance to the work as a whole.

## **Other learning opportunities**

Kimono may look elegant, but putting one on requires specialized knowledge. Far from being strictly about paper cranes, origami is a complex art whose creations can be stunning. Traditional tea ceremony, or chado, is an elaborate and elegant affair that is one of Japan's most celebrated cultural practices. The Japanese harp known as the koto, which is played lying across one's lap, can be heard in Noh performances.