Self-Expression and the Structural Syllabus

--- Bridging the gap: An Analysis of a Learner Corpus and Journal ---

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The new Courses of Study for English (Foreign Languages) that have been implemented since 2002 (for junior high school), and 2003 (for senior high school) emphasize the importance of nurturing “practical communication ability” among students. In March, 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology issued the Action Plan to Cultivate “Japanese with English Abilities,” which clarifies the specific learner goals of English education in Japan.

Despite this official shift to the Communicative Language Teaching framework, a serious problem remains. Both in junior and senior high schools, there are two groups of teachers: those who are dependent on the grammar-translation method, and those who eschew grammar in favor of communication (Kanatani, 2002).

Researchers in the field of English education do not see this situation as an either-or choice but as a necessity for the integration of both. Ellis (2002, p21), while pointing out that only a structural syllabus ensures “a systematic coverage of the grammar of the L2” and that it “provides teachers and learners with a clear sense of progression,” argues for a curriculum that incorporates both the structural and communicative syllabuses.

Although grammar instruction still dominates a large portion of the English curriculum in Japan, it can be revised so that it will help students to learn how to communicate and express themselves in English. What needs to be done is to specify the elements which will bridge the gap between grammar and communication.

Thus, the issue of “what to teach” (that of syllabus design) --- “how to teach” being no less important --- needs to be addressed. The primary concern of this paper is to explore what should be taught in the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom to enable students to express themselves in English, especially in aural / oral communication.

The remainder of this paper focuses on:
- a discussion of the relationship of grammar, communication, and human cognition (§ 2)
- two research questions addressed here (§ 3)
- an explanation of how two sets of data (native-nonnative speakers’ conversations and a learner journal) were collected (§ 4)
- analysis of the data (§ 5, 6)
- discussion of pedagogical implications (§ 7)

The central argument of this paper is that grammar instruction will better contribute to communication by incorporating “real-life” English data, language learning strategies, and a deeper understanding of human cognition.

2 Communication and Grammar Redefined

2.1 Assessment Perspectives and Grammar Redefined

The overall objectives of Foreign Languages (for Upper Secondary School) stipulated in the Course of Study are as follows:

To develop students’ practical communication abilities such as understanding information and the speaker's or writer's intentions, and expressing their own ideas, deepening the understanding of language and culture, and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages. (MEXT, 2003)

Based on these objectives, teachers are requested to teach and assess their students according to Four Perspectives of Assessment, which are actually the itemization of the above objectives. (Table 1 shows a simplified chart.)
Table 1  Four Assessment Perspectives

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Perspectives</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interest, willingness and a positive attitude toward communicating in a foreign language</td>
<td>Active participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effort to engage in communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to express oneself in a foreign language</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ability to understand a foreign language</td>
<td>Accuracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appropriateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge and understanding of language and culture</td>
<td>Linguistic Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural Understanding</td>
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</table>

Conventional English education in Japan has focused mainly upon imparting “knowledge and understanding of language and culture.” The current framework proposes that teachers, by nurturing “a positive attitude toward communication,” help students utilize their knowledge in “expressing” and “understanding” English.

To integrate knowledge and use, the students should be placed in situations where they have to use empirical knowledge. The newly added section in the Course of Study entitled “Treatment of the Language Activities” provides teachers with examples of “language-use situations” and “functions of language.”

Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999, pp.4-5), proposing a departure from the traditional mindset, offer a well-integrated model of grammar and its communicative use. They argue that grammar is not only about form (syntax), but about meaning (semantics) and use (pragmatics). The students must be taught not only how a structure is formed but how to use it meaningfully and appropriately.

Takashima (2000) proposes teaching grammar as “active knowledge” instead of “static knowledge.” Focusing specifically on the Japanese EFL setting, he argues that explicit grammar instruction incorporating pragmatics teaching and task activities shows positive effects on learning.

Time constraints and students’ needs will affect the actual amount of time allotted to tasks and performance assessment. However, a more holistic view of grammar which integrates form, meaning, and use will change the quality and applicability of classroom instruction in Japan. Grammar can be taken to mean whatever knowledge is needed to generate an utterance or discourse in the target language.

2.2 Components of Grammar and Dual Coding

Knowledge of grammar can be divided into two types: implicit knowledge and explicit knowledge. In the field of second language acquisition, the argument as to the effectiveness of grammar instruction has centered on the “interface” between the two types of knowledge.

The non-interface position (Krashen, 1985) argues that true linguistic competence (or implicit knowledge) remains unaffected by instruction (or explicit knowledge). The weak interface position (Ellis, 1994) postulates that certain instructional techniques may help learners “notice” and eventually “acquire” certain linguistic features. The strong interface position (McLaughlin, 1990) supposes that, through practice, declarative (or explicit) knowledge may be converted into implicit knowledge available for spontaneous L2 use.

In their meta-analytic research review, Norris and Ortega (2001) compared 47 studies on L2 instruction to assess the effectiveness of explicit / implicit instruction. The results showed that explicit instruction was significantly more effective than implicit instruction, and that the effects of Form Focused Instruction were durable.

As much as one can infer that implicit knowledge is more efficient in real-time communication, and conversational skills may best be acquired in a natural setting, it seems more important in an EFL environment such as Japan to make conscious efforts to understand what the two types of knowledge comprise and how the learner can process both of them in communication.

Skehan (1998) argues that, in the human brain, both exemplar-based and rule-based coding are taking place concurrently in processing language (dual-coding). Drawing upon Skehan’s theory, but primarily based upon the author’s experience as an EFL learner, the learning model represented by Figure 2 seems close to what is happening.
The inner circle (A) represents the amount of English that a person can use with confidence (i.e. without much conscious effort), while the outer one (B) represents the amount of English that s/he can manage to produce with the help of her/his explicit grammar knowledge. The linguistic resources in (B) exist as raw material waiting to be automatized. At the innermost core is the CPU (Central Processing Unit), which processes the linguistic resources both in (A) and (B), switching back and forth between the two modes of language processing.

As the inner circle expands, the area around it will grow as well, resulting in an expanded repertoire of expression. Likewise, expansion of the outer circle “pulls” the inner circle outward. The CPU, an imaginary module containing affective, cognitive, and psychomotor domains, regulates the learning and utilization of both implicit (A) and implicit (B) knowledge. Paradis (1994) states that the brain’s limbic system, which is responsible for emotions, plays an important role in acquiring implicit knowledge. Emotional involvement, or an intention to communicate a message, seems crucial in the expansion of the inner circle.

The author believes that the inner circle (A) functions as a source of confidence, and has a priming effect in facilitating the use of explicit knowledge (B). The bigger the inner circle, the more automatized the language production, thus, the more cognitive capacity spared for consciously using the resources in (B). On the other hand, too big an inner circle with too small a periphery represents a learner whose L2 use mostly depends upon formulaic vernacular, impeding the creative use of L2 (as in the case of those whose L2 is fossilized at a basic level). Whatever the ultimate goal of the learners may be, a language teacher must at least help them to build a large enough inner circle to start their individual journey of second / foreign language learning, while securing a balanced expansion of the outer circle.

If the components and the nature of (A), (B), and the CPU can be identified, these can be utilized as important elements in a syllabus. The assumption is that explicit instruction of those elements --- especially the ones included in (A) and CPU --- will enhance students’ communicative competence.

### 3 Research Questions

Drawing upon the above discussion, and defining grammar as all the necessary resources for language processing, two research questions arise.

- What grammar items are important for self-expression in a face-to-face setting? ⇒ Components of (A).
- What language learning strategies do students need in order to process grammar items effectively in face-to-face communication? ⇒ Components of the CPU

### 4 Method

#### 4.1 Participants

The data being analyzed in this paper were obtained from daily face-to-face English conversation sessions (20 to 30 minutes each) which were conducted for a Japanese elementary school teacher (a novice EFL learner) between April 2003 and March 2004. The teacher was conducting research on elementary school English education in Japan. Three native English speakers (two Canadians, one British) taught the sessions in turn, with the author participating as a mediator. The number of participants and the topics of conversations vary, but the discussions mostly centered on personal lives, cross-cultural issues, and education. The sample data, therefore, can be defined as a typical
teacher-room conversation with mixed L1 speakers and mixed L2 proficiency levels.

4.2 Procedure (Figure 3)

After each session, the main part of the conversation was “reconstructed” by the author and the native speakers, typed into a text file (7500 words), and fed into a text analyzer (WordLab, 2003). At the same time, the elementary school teacher recorded his reflections upon his learning in his daily journal, and reported it to the author (121 days / 62 pages). Several conversation sessions were audiorecorded for supplementary discourse analysis.

4.3 Rationale for a “Reconstructed Conversation” Corpus

The reconstructed conversations may have lost much of their authenticity in that the Non-native speakers’ utterances were transcribed into “correct” English and that only the main portion of each session was recorded. The size of the corpus (7,500 words) may not deserve its name, either, compared to 1,000,000 words in the Brown Corpus, and 100,000,000 words in the British National Corpus. However, the author considers the obtained data sample of great educational value, since it contains a number of expressions that Japanese speakers of English have always wanted to use, and can serve as a standard attainment level toward which instruction should aim.

5 Analysis of Reconstructed Conversations

5.1 Word Frequency Counts and Collocations

Corpus Linguistics enables analyses and complex computations of a large data (or a corpus). According to Biber, et al., (1998, p.148), analyses of register variation in a multiple-text corpus revealed that the following features co-occur in “involved production.” (Table 2) Such features can be inferred as characteristics of spoken face-to-face communication among native speakers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>private verbs / that-deletion / contractions / present tense verbs / second-person pronouns / do as pro-verb / analytic negation / demonstrative pronouns / general emphasis / first-person pronouns / pronoun it / be as main verb / causative subordination / discourse particles / indefinite pronouns / general hedges / amplifiers / sentence relatives / wh-questions / possibility modals / non-phrasal coordination / wh-clauses / final prepositions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 Co-occurrence features in “involved” production adapted from Biber, Conrad, and Reppen (1998)

The reconstructed conversation corpus, the English of which is not completely “native-like” because of its relative grammaticality, turned out to share some of the features listed above (highlighted features). Word frequency counts among main verbs (Table 3), and among all words (Table 4), combined with collocation analysis provide clues for observation.
Table 4  Word frequency counts (all words)

<p>| | | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>322</td>
<td>in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>the</td>
<td>285</td>
<td>of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>to</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>a</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>for</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>188</td>
<td>have</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>163</td>
<td>What</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>it</td>
<td>134</td>
<td>do</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>my</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>that</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>was</td>
<td>115</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>is (s)</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>en</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 shows frequency counts of verbs other than the Copula-be, have, and do. It can be inferred that verbs that describe actions tend to be used in the past tense (go, get, say) while verbs stating preferences, opinions, or knowledge (like, think, know) tend to be used in the present tense.

Demonstrative Pronouns --- that

The pronoun that in this sample is often preceded by Oh, or Wow. That is being used to respond to the other party by expressing feelings or giving opinions:

Oh, that reminds me!
Oh, that’s too bad.
Wow, that’s amazing.
That’s pretty cheap.

Opportunity of Self-Expression --- my

The personal pronoun my is most frequently sandwiched between a preposition and a noun:

around my neck, at my university festival, for my son, in my neighborhood, with my colleagues from my school, etc.

The one-on-one setting of the conversation necessitates discussion of personal matters. The reason that Japanese students often use the in cases where possessive personal pronouns are required ("*in the house" instead of "in my house") may derive from a lack of experience in processing my in conversation.

Discourse Markers / Initiators --- So

In addition to the use as a modifier (I was so disappointed, It was so embarrassing, It was so much fun!), the word "so" is being used as a “discourse initiator,” which facilitates an utterance:

So, what’s your dream, Mr. ***?
So, Mr.***, what color are your eyes?
So, what did you do over the weekend?
So, how was your long vacation?

Indefinite pronouns --- one

The indefinite pronoun one does not rank within the top 20 on Table 4, but its use is important in that Japanese EFL learners do not seem to be familiar with it.

Examples from the sample corpus include:

I went to an onsen place with my wife. You know there’s usually one for men and one for women …

I bought a DVD recorder. I’ve wanted one for years and I finally got one.

Abundant questions --- What

In order of frequency, What do you..., What did you..., What is your..., What about you, What kind of..., What happened appeared on the collocation table. Like other chunks (lexical bundles), these words are often pronounced with reduced forms (Whaddya...? Wha’chya...?), causing trouble for Japanese learners.

5.2 Syntactic Analysis (NPs and VPs)

In conversation, real-time processing is required. Therefore, the speaker minimizes his/her cognitive load by using set phrases, which are often called “chunks” or “lexical bundles.” The knowledge on structures is utilized to combine those set phrases. The less proficient the learner, the more consciously s/he will have to mobilize the grammar knowledge.

Verbs, in this light, can be regarded as the linkage or connectors that form those chunks.

Table 5  Copula-be collocation

Table 5 shows high frequency Copula-be collocations in the sample data. Such combinations clearly occur very frequently in these daily conversations. It is also clear that a variety of adjectives follow Copula-be.

High Frequency Verbs and the Importance of NPs

Collocation analysis of high frequency verbs reveals that NPs (Noun Phrases) which are combined with verbs vary in construction (Table 6). However, the variety of noun phrases does not seem to be addressed sufficiently in the Japanese classroom, which the author suspects is a major cause of Japanese people’s inability to express themselves fluently.
I went to an all-you-can-eat restaurant [a + adj. + n.]
to a hot spring.  [a + adj. + n.]
to a wedding party… [a + gerund + n.]
to the dentist and had my tooth capped.
[the + n.]
to Tokyo Hands. [Proper n.]

I like samurai movies. [plural]
classical music. [singular]
skiing. [gerund]
to speak English. [to-infinitive]
rotenburo, Akihabara [Japanese words]
it where I live. [idiomatic use]

….my brother got a new pair of skis.
I’m going to get laser surgery on my eyes…
I try to get the general idea without worrying about every word.

Table 6  go, like, get and Noun phrases

5.3 Complex Constructions
If a speaker uses a complex construction, there is usually a situation that necessitates its use. The following extracts from the sample data provide such instances.

Relative Clauses

On New Year’s Day I had a dream where I won 100 million yen in a lottery.
It was a love story about a little boy and girl who fell in love with each other.

Postmodification

There’s a park called the “Railway Park.”
I saw a movie entitled “Melody.”

Conditional Clauses

For example, if a man was big, he wouldn’t go, “Oh, I have to go on a diet,” as much as a girl would.

Comparative

I tried to talk to them as much as possible.

Present Perfect

I’ve been playing the trombone for six years.
It’s been on TV for more than 20 years.
So I’ve been buying lottery tickets.
It was the first time I’ve made the last train.
(Notice that I’d made would make a slight difference.)

Although still struggling with a “speaker’s block” or L1 interference (in line 3), he is able to manage interaction in English. This type of procedural knowledge (turn-taking skill) was one of the most salient accomplishments this speaker made as a result of the conversation sessions.

6 Analysis of the EFL learner’s English Conversation Journal

6.1 Language Learning Strategies
Oxford (1990) argues for the importance of language learning strategies in developing communicative competence and has classified various strategies into six major categories:

Memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies are called “direct strategies,” since they are directly connected to how to process the target language. Among these, the last group --- compensation strategies --- corresponds to what Canale and Swain (1984) call the “strategic competence.”

On the other hand, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies are called “indirect strategies” since they affect language processing indirectly. As Oxford herself admits, “classification conflicts are inevitable,” and some strategies may be hard to classify (as might have been experienced by Japanese teachers working on criteria rubrics). However, the awareness of those components is beneficial in enhancing language learning.
6.2 From Journal Entries to Instructional Objectives

From the elementary school teacher’s journal entries, 72 statements were extracted and categorized according to Oxford’s classification system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Memory strategies</th>
<th>Cognitive strategies</th>
<th>Compensation Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make connections between English words / phrases with their correct sounds.</td>
<td>Use newly learned expressions as soon as possible.</td>
<td>Learn to guess the meaning from various clues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorize words and idioms with corresponding situations.</td>
<td>Practice by telling the same story to more than one person.</td>
<td>Use gestures and realia to be understood better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to convert English into images (thoughts) and vice versa directly.</td>
<td>Practice by watching TV or listening to CDs.</td>
<td>Use discourse markers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorize the English equivalents for Japanese idioms/buzz words.</td>
<td>Learn to take notes.</td>
<td>Use coined words or Japanese to avoid silence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Know different mnemonic devices.</td>
<td>Learn to use dictionaries and other resources.</td>
<td>Think of a topic of conversation beforehand to take control.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Metacognitive strategies</th>
<th>Affective strategies</th>
<th>Social Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Find out how to learn a foreign language.</td>
<td>Learn to feel comfortable in face-to-face conversation.</td>
<td>Learn to ask question if you don’t understand someone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to find one’s weakpoints, make a list, and try to improve on them.</td>
<td>Learn to feel comfortable in face-to-face conversation.</td>
<td>Try to form good relationships with other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to plan how to prepare for a task.</td>
<td>Get over an inferiority complex of being unable to speak English fluently.</td>
<td>Learn to negotiate and/or cooperate with others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learn to feel comfortable in face-to-face conversation.</td>
<td>Try to get over the shock of being exposed to English.</td>
<td>Learn to understand other people’s feelings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accept praise and have confidence in oneself.</td>
<td></td>
<td>Learn about foreign (and your own) cultures.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 Direct Strategies

Table 8 Indirect Strategies

Instructional objectives obtained from EFL learner’s English Conversation Journal
---Categorization according to Oxford (1990)

Comments concerning metacognitive strategies, which top the other categories (Figure 4), include:

[1] I thought knowing formulaic expressions would make me less nervous in conversation.

Comments in other categories (memory, cognitive, compensation, affective, and social strategies) include:

[3] The word “red” sounded like “wred.”
[4] I try to use a new expression as soon as I learn it.
[5] I guessed the meaning from the speaker’s facial expression.
[7] I asked when I didn’t catch some words. I was so glad that I asked.

The total of 72 comments were then grouped according to their main points and converted into instructional objectives. For example, comment [1] and comment [2] were paraphrased into “Find out how to learn a foreign language.” Likewise, comment [3] was converted to “Make connections between English words / phrases with their correct sounds.” The resultant list is shown in Tables 7 and 8. The top, highlighted entry in each category is what the author regarded as important based upon his observation of the participant.

Since the participant is an adult with high cognitive skills, this rubric may not be applicable to all schools. Nevertheless, if such objectives are extracted from successful students’ experiences and are matched with feasible tasks, then they will become essential syllabus components.

7 Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications

Second / Foreign language teaching has centered upon how to help the learner acquire implicit knowledge
of the target language by different modes of instruction. Research has shown conflicting views about the effects of instruction as opposed to naturalistic learning.

The main concern of this paper, however, was to clarify what kind of knowledge (be it implicit or explicit) is needed to communicate, and what kind of mental mediation is applied for processing the knowledge --- namely, grammar for “real-life” English and language learning strategies. Awareness of these components and inclusion of them in syllabus design will keep the Structural Syllabus valid and efficient.

Some considerations for the design of a syllabus and lesson plans may be:

**Contents to be considered for a syllabus**

- phonetic coding exercises
- vocabulary building exercises with mnemonic training
- topics for casual teacher-student interactions
- language learning strategies
- topics for a few performance tests per year (so that the learner can integrate their skills and knowledge they learn in classes) [the tasks may include ones that the learners themselves set according to their needs]
- schedule for one-on-one conversation sessions for all students
- explicit instruction of grammar and discourse in different registers and text types [material may include transcripts of actual conversations]

**Considerations for daily lessons**

- Students should be exposed to English spoken at normal speed (and with natural sounds).
- Noun phrases (including article usage) need more emphasis in teaching.
- Lexical bundles and their use should be taught.
- Example sentences presented to students should be natural in usage, emotionally relatable to students, and recyclable in student’s daily lives.
- Grammar items should be taught primarily with production in mind.
- Natural L1 translation may be utilized to create strong L2 mental representations

With further classroom-based research into communicative grammar and language learning strategies, the teacher will enable the learner to gain access to more useful English data--- and to their latent mental capacities.

**Software Package Used in Corpus Analyses**

WordLab. (2003), available from Japan China Industrial Communications Co., Ltd.

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**References**


