

English Education in Japan: Back to the Basics

James Gracey, Osaka YMCA International School, Japan

The Asian Conference on Education 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Japan is caught between a rock and a hard place. It is aware of the need for its people to be competent speakers of English in a world whose cultural boundaries are growing thinner and thinner, yet has difficulty producing any. One look at the pundits and the chorus becomes "Japanese and English grammar is so different!!". One look at the academics and tune changes to "It's a problem steeped in deep cultural issues!!" The reality is that both sides are right. English is quite different from Japanese in syntax and also there indeed has been and continues to be a huge push for students to study English only to pass the infamous university entrance exams. But one crucial point seems to go unnoticed among all the exclamation made in the name of English in Japan. It is something that underlies this entire clamor and the very essence of language itself. It is something that babies know so well and lies at the heart of all language competence. It is speaking. The entire conversation of English education improvement in Japan is glossing the most important aspect of opening one's mouth and speaking and this paper explores one way to address this most crucial issue.

Keywords: (English Education, Applied Linguistics, Universal Grammar, Japan)

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

This paper illustrates an argument, built lightly upon the theory of a Universal Grammar (UG), about recreating an environment similar to when a human learns to communicate in a native language (L1), to aid individuals in acquiring communication skills in a second language (L2). Using instructional design (ID) methodology, an initial attempt to create such an environment with over 1000 Japanese high school (JHS) students is explained. Namely, the action of communication if broken down into distinct parts, the most fundamentally important of these parts is located, and analysis of a desired state to which the JHS students aspire to be in is described. Next, the beginning stages of a description of the actual state in which the JHS currently exist are laid out. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to further the ID process and potential revisions to be made.

Universal Grammar?

UG is a theory that explores the natural phenomenon in the brain that allows humans to communicate in their native language[s] (L1) despite receiving no formal education to do so (White, 2003). An example to illustrate what I mean is the rule in English that to ask a question one must first switch the subject and auxiliary verbs of the sentence.

He is happy -----> Is he happy?

Humans who speak English as one of their native languages are never taught this rule yet they all manage to obey it as they learn to speak. Another such rule is the dissimilar use of the plural form among compound words. For example, when describing, say, a house that is infested with mice, we could say mice-infested, yet we would never describe a house infested with rats as rats-infested. This distinction is naturally obeyed by all native learners of English and many linguists attribute it to UG (Pinker, 1994). To build my argument, I suppose the reason for this is equal parts innate structures in our brain (UG) and specific structures in our environment while we are acquiring L1. My argument is as follows: If every human has a UG that allows them to speak a language without any formal education, and they end up speaking the languages that are most prevalent in the environment wherein they are born, then it must be the relationship between the UG and the specific circumstances of their environment that underpins the entire concept of L1 acquisition. Assuming that in adults, the UG never actually goes away, that it simply becomes dull from years of disuse due to achieving L1 competence to the point where it is possible to undertake other intellectual pursuits, it should be possible to stimulate the UG anew to learn a second language (L2) by creating an environment that is similar to when we were learning our L1 as infants. If special attention is given to ensure this environment is catered to the unique circumstances of the learner, L2 acquisition, at least communicatively, could occur as naturally as L1. Imagine such an endeavor! Learning a second language the same way we learned our native tongue! I would like to share with you my experience thus far with such an endeavor, specifically with attempting to create an environment where 1000 Japanese high school students learn to communicate in English as if it they were learning it as infants.

Creating an Environment with Instructional Design

What are the first steps in creating an environment where Japanese high school students learn to communicate in English (L2) similar to the environment where they learned to communicate in Japanese (L1)? Instructional Design (ID) can offer some insight. ID, to put it simply, refers to designing a way for individuals to reach a solution to a problem by means of instruction. The first step in this process is to locate a problem and clarify any vague terminology in the problem statement. The next step is to describe what is called a desired state - an environment where the problem does not exist. Then the actual state is described - the environment where the problem currently exists. The final step is to describe how an individual within the actual state would be able to reach the desired state. This is done by designing an path that the individual would follow; an instructional unit that acts as a bridge between the two states. (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009).

For example, say my problem is that my younger brother is not eating enough cookies; through the process of instructional design, how would I create an environment where this problem no longer exists? First, as stated above, I need to further define any vague terminology in my problem statement - the word enough. I need to further define how many cookies are enough. In the current step of this ID process I cannot give a specific number that qualifies as enough, although I may be able to later on. Currently it would suffice to spell out a more specific definition of the word enough to ensure the subsequent steps are properly focused. I will alter the problem statement to the further defined form of, my younger brother is not eating the number of cookies that satisfies him when his desire for cookies arises.

Why such the elaboration? Why is it not enough to just say enough? The end game of Instructional design is to have participants performing at target outcomes. If the definition of those outcomes is not consistent with the definitions of the problems they are the proposed solution of, no beneficial instruction has taken place - no problems have been solved in an immediately noticeable way. Enough is too general of a term to be survive the ID process. Imagine the process of instructional design as a sausage maker and the words we use as the meat we put into it. We could try to stick a solid chunk of beef (a vague term like enough) into the funnel and turn the handle, but we would be sorely disappointed if we expected any sort of sausage to come out the other end. We would first need to take this solid chunk of beef and break it down into a more malleable form (A specific term like number that satisfies when desire for cookies arises), maybe add some berries and spice, before we put it into the machine. Still, the shape of the meat will be different once it comes out of the machine (there might be an actual number figure, etc.), but it will at least come out (I do not think it is coincidence that the ID process mirrors how the human mind naturally handles whole pieces of information - by first understanding its composite parts). The reason I labor this point is because, as will be seen in the next section, the term communication in my problem is incredibly vague and goes through a very extensive process of deconstruction.

The next step is to define the desired state by looking for an environment where this problem, in its specifically defined form, does not exist. Where are there people who, whenever their desire for cookies arises, are eating the right number of cookies to satisfy this desire? After some extensive research I have decided that such an

environment exists wherever there are healthy looking adults who choose cookies as their sweet of preference when the desire hits. The reason I decided on this environment is because it parallels my question very well. Adult parallels whenever their desire arises in that generally, as an adult, one is free to consume whenever and however one wants. Healthy looking parallels eating the right number of cookies in that these adults are not eating so many cookies to the point of appearing unhealthy. Now that I have located a potential candidate environment to use as my desired state, I need to describe this environment. The most efficient way to do this would be to physically enter the environment and ask these adults, also known as subject matter experts (SME), to share their extensive knowledge about how they freely eat cookies yet do so at a healthy rate. This method is, however, not necessary considering the simplicity of the context. Any adult who makes enough money to buy cookies could act as a SME, therefore I can answer a lot of these questions using my own intuition. The questions below detail one attempt to describe the desired state by asking some simple questions.

Q1.1 - How are you able to eat cookies whenever you want?

A1.1 - I have money that allows me to buy them and I live alone, therefore no one tells me to not buy them

Q1.2 - How do you know how many cookies are enough to satisfy your desire for sweets?

A1.2 - I have enough experience with upset stomachs from eating too many that I am sensitive to my tummy's signals telling me when I have had enough.

Q1.3 - How many cookies do you usually eat in one sitting

A1.3 - 5

What we have here is a desired state description of - Adults are able to eat cookies every time the desire for something sweets hits because they are single and have money. Also, their healthy state dictates that they eat enough cookies which is around five per desire, the reason they do this being they have had a lot of experience with upset tummies from eating too many cookies that they are sensitive to when their stomach signals they have had enough.

What needs to be mentioned here is that I could keep getting deeper with these questions, and I would - depending on the type of problem that needs to be addressed. I could keep digging with more questions about the type of tummy signals and how they differ from eating too many salty foods, etc. There is no end. I must decide when the description I have attained of the desired state is fit for the next step - describing the actual state.

The reason the desired state is described first is because its description is used as a comparison to describe the actual state. It is not effective to give an objective description of the actual state, for such a description will lack the necessary information to perform the next step - provide a proper goal statement. The goal statement is what the entire instructional unit will be based on, in other words, the

goal statement dictates how the instructional unit will bridge the gap between the actual and desired states. For this there is a need to define the actual state in relation to its desired state. This is done, once again, by answering lots of questions, but this time about why individuals in the actual state (my younger brother) are not able to perform like those in the desired state (the healthy looking adult), which means the questions need to be paralleled with the answers used to describe the desired state. The typical way to ask these questions would be to enter the environment where the instructional participants exist and ask them questions similar to the ones used to describe the desired state. Due to the simplicity of the context, again, I can use my own intuition to answer the questions.

Q2.1 - Why does my brother not have money to buy cookies and why does he not live alone?

A2.1 - He is eight years old. He is too young to legally work and lacks the life skills to live alone.

Q2.2 - Why does my brother not have enough experience with eating too many cookies to understand his tummy signals?

A2.2 - He has only been eating cookies for about six years since he graduated from baby food and he does not have free access to cookies to allow for many experiences.

Q2.3 - Why does my brother not know the number of cookies that would give him ideal satisfaction?

A2.3 - See A2.2.

From this analysis, an actual state could be described as - Eight year old males are not able to eat cookies because they are too young to legally work and too dependent to live alone. They also do not know the healthy number of cookies that would satisfy their desire because they lack the necessary number of experiences of upset stomachs, due to their limited access to cookies, to know this number.

You may have noticed that I am generalizing these statements to all eight year old males and all healthy-looking adults who eat cookies. To make these generalizations in any scientifically acceptable way I would need to gather data from many more individuals who fit the description. As long as I make this discrepancy explicit when I submit this paper to be published in next month's issue of Cookies for All, All for Cookies, I should be fine.

Finally from these two states - actual and desired - we can start the process of creating an environment where the problem may not exist. This process is the final step of designing an instructional unit that is catered specifically towards the needs of individuals in the actual state in helping them traverse the gap into the desired state. This is not the final step in the ID process, however, there is still a step of creating evaluation instruments (formative and summative) to ensure participants of the instructions are progressing correctly, and the endless yet beautiful process of

iteration - reviewing and revising the entire ID process until the end of time - because until life ceases to exist on this planet we will never cease in trying to understand it.

Although the actual instructional unit is not possible to know at this moment, we can think of a goal that would spearhead the creation of the entire unit. The goal would describe what the participants of the instruction would be doing if they had transferred the gap into the desired state. It would speak of a list of outcomes that are catered to the specific needs of those in the actual state. For example, to satisfy the need, in the desired state, of money and independence that is lacking in the actual state, a potential goal statement could be - participants will be able to find a way to make some money legally and demonstrate independence to parents. This goal would then be dissected into the necessary amount of sub-goals to allow for an instructional unit to be created that ensured each sub-goal was achieved by the individual, and measured for proper internalization. The only reason I have this as the final step of this paper is because this is where I currently stand in my process of creating an environment where Japanese high school students learn to communicate in English (L2) similar to how they learned to communicate in Japanese (L1). I will continue this process and write another paper detailing the latter steps as they come to fruition.

So without further ado, here is what I have done so far.

Breaking down communication

As in the cookie example, my problem (Japanese high school students do not communicate well in English) has a very vague and bulky term that will not fit well into the sausage maker - namely, communication. What does it mean to communicate? When I describe both the actual and desired states, how would I be able to tell if, and how, communication is happening? To define communication into a more malleable term I have decided to break it down into its various sub-actions, locate the most fundamentally important of these sub-actions, and treat that action as the term I use to define both the desired and actual states. I wish I could cite some prestigious paper that supports the logic I use here but there is no need because baseball already did it for me.

Communication is a complex action in the game of language in the same way as hitting a homerun is a complex action in the game of baseball. Every action, regardless to the game it belongs to, is composed of a hierarchy of sub-actions that are required for its completion, with an ascending scale of importance, ending with the top-most sub-action being the most fundamental in importance. Fundamental in importance means the lack thereof would render the completion of the whole action impossible. Here is an illustration for your understanding ease:

Fundamentally Important Action

^

Sub-action #1

^

Sub-action #2

^

Sub-action #3

^

Etc.

The action hierarchy of hitting a homerun, for example, would something like this:

Swing a bat at a ball

^

Properly position oneself in front of the pitcher

^

Practice swinging a bat

^

Stretch swinging muscles

^

Eat a good breakfast

^

Exercise swinging muscles

^

Study the swing of other well-known players

^

Study the pitcher's style of next game's opponent team

While all the sub-actions leading up to the top are important, they are not fundamentally important because remove any one of them and hitting a homerun is still possible, even if only at a fraction of a percent. Remove, however, the top-most action of swinging the bat at the ball and the action of hitting a homerun has been rendered possible to the level of zero percent; in other words, impossible. Organizing an action from this hierarchical perspective allows us to peer into any action like it were a living organism to see how it works and if needed, how we could fix it. I have organized the action of communication into following hierarchy of sub-actions:

Open one's mouth and speak

^

Think of what to say

^

Mentally organize words into sentence using syntax

^

Ponder upon meaning of current emotion

^

Allow oneself to react

^

Observe one's environment

What you may have noticed is that the top-most action, the most fundamentally important action, the action that if removed would render the entire action of communication impossible is to speak and not to write. Although writing is a form of communication that does not require one to speak and therefore it too could be considered for the top-spot, I did not choose it because in any future global context in which Japanese people are to use English, I doubt someone will approach them and ask, "Excuse me, but can you by chance write English?"

People who are involved in the English education in Japan will notice something very interesting about this hierarchy of sub-actions, namely think of what to say. It is common knowledge that Japanese people are very concerned with image, not only visual, but also mental. Therefore they place a lot of emphasis on educating themselves on the correct way of saying something by spending a lot of time studying grammar. While this is an important sub-action to proper communication, it still is not the most fundamentally important. To understand this one only need enter a Japanese high school classroom and watch as students, with sincere desire, mull over within their minds how to respond to the question, "How long did you sleep last night", only to give in to silence as the possible ways of answering become too overwhelming. Japan's concern with image, which has led to a concern with correct English, often causes fear to strike silence into the heart of anyone with the opportunity to communicate, because they think, "Nothing is worse than saying something wrong." This is one of the many problems that can be blamed for Japan's issue with English communication, yet focusing more energy on this action over simply speaking will not create an solution - as my hierarchy of communication shows.

Now that I have defined communication into a malleable form, let's start the sausage-making process.

Desired State

To describe the desired state I need to answer as many questions as I can about the conditions that allow for the UG of an infant to connect with its environment and allow for spoken competence in L1. Similar to the cookie example, the SME for this desired state, an infant, is an individual who cannot communicate with me in the way that I need, so it is up to my intuition and any relevant text I can get a hold of to properly describe this environment. To aid myself in this process I have created three categories that I believe underpin all the relevant information needed to describe this desired state: cultural; social; and personal. These categories are general enough in importance that if I analyze the desired state through their categorical lenses, I should be able to take what I learn and, after a little alteration to demographic relevance, use it to describe the same categories that underpin a classroom of Japanese high school students (the actual state). The following are the questions I will use to play around with.

Q3.1 - What are the cultural constructs that allow an infant's UG to connect with its environment and learn to communicate in its L1 by the sole action of speaking?

Q3.2 - What are the social constructs that allow an infant's UG to connect with its environment and learn to communicate in its L1 by the sole action of speaking?

Q3.3 - What are the personal constructs that allow an infant's UG to connect with its environment and to learn to communicate in its L1 by the sole action of speaking?

As the answering of these questions is where I currently stand in the ID process of addressing my problem, all I can offer is a small review of the ideas I have found to be of use.

A3.1 - It is culturally expected of a baby to not be able to speak, and therefore when a baby does begin to speak, it is expected that the baby will make many mistakes. There is, in fact, a culture of "cute" that surrounds these mistakes, wherein the baby is praised for making them, and therefore feels motivated to continue the process that allows for these mistakes to happen - speaking. As a function of UG is to organize the random sounds a baby hears from its environment into words and phrases useful for communication, a crucial part of this organization is to confirm, by vocal repetition, whether or not what was heard is correct. The culture of "cute" allows this process to happen with ease.

A3.2 - Similar to the culture of "cute" that allows babies to comfortably make mistakes with their spoken word, every single person involved in a baby's life is expecting a baby to make a mistake. Indeed every person is an educator, poised to jump at each mistake a baby makes with their opinion of what is correct. They only need to first hear a baby speak a mistake. This willingness to educate that exists at a social level could be the construct behind the saying, "it takes a village to raise a child". Although people these days are a little more particular with how their child is educated, the UG of each baby still

views these corrections received from any individual as learning opportunities. It is not until some considerable socialization has occurred - when a baby is no longer a baby but a child - that these socially instigated moments of education are seen more as annoyances than useful opportunities. Certainly the degree of active engagement of the UG has something to do with this change in perception. Also, does the UG of each baby react only to overt attempts to educate from an individual? How often does a surprised mother ask her child, "Where did you learn to say that?"

A3.3 - The personal construct that allows for a baby's UG to connect with its environment through speaking must be the need of each human to develop an identity. For it is this need alone that motivates all curious exploration a human undertakes; the bulk of which is done by asking, vocally, questions to people who may know the answer. Babies are doing it the moment they emerge from the womb in the form of crying. Although crying is a form of spoken language unintelligible to most humans, except for perhaps, the baby's mother, it is spoken language nonetheless. For it is through crying, giggling, fussing, and the myriad other noises babies make that they communicate to their caretakers very important needs that, the satisfaction of, lay the foundations for what is to become their, indeed our, identity. UG has a key role in allowing the continued satisfaction of these identity establishing needs by adapting to their evolution of complexity. When once a simple cry brought the milk a baby wanted, such a language no longer suffices. Babies eventually develop more complex desires that milk no longer satisfies. UG allows a babe's cry to evolve into the necessary language to communicate these complexities as they arise. There is indeed a powerful link between UG and the development of individual human identity.

A summarized description of the desired state is as follows: An infant's UG is allowed connection to its environment by first, the culture of cute that views spoken mistakes by babies as cute and therefore permissible; second, a social expectation of every adult human to be ready to correct these mistakes; and third, a personal need to use spoken language as one's main form of identity development.

Actual State

As in the cookie example, the questions used to create a description of the actual state of Japanese high school students will parallel the description of the desired state.

Q3.1 - What are the cultural constructs that do not allow a culture of "cute" to surround a JHS student's mistakes as they speak in L2?

Q3.2 - What are the social constructs that do not allow an expectation to be built around every adult to correct the mistakes made by JHS students as they speak in L2?

Q3.3 - What are the personal constructs that do not allow L2 to be used as a tool to develop the identity of JHS students?

According to the ID process, after a substantial description of the actual state is acquired by means of providing answers to the above questions, a goal statement can be formed, around which an instructional unit can be built to help JHS students leave this actual state and arrive at the desired state. This is, of course, all theoretical. There is no such thing as certainty in the ID process, only action. Hence, it's heavily reliant nature on iteration. If the particular iteration I have spelled out in this paper does not lead to a viable instructional unit, I must revise the entire process with the information I gained from well-crafted evaluation instruments.

Conclusion

This ID process of deconstructing the act of communication to its fundamentally important action and defining actual and desired states around this action that can be applied to a classroom of JHS students is the first of its kind to cut through the noise surrounding the popular problem of the English communication difficulties of the Japanese people and provide the start for a solution that can be internalized by Japanese society as a whole. While the iteration spelled out in this paper is by no means complete, it does provide a starting point for further work to be conducted.

A continuation of the description of the actual state, development of instructional tools to help JHS students cross the gap, and construction of evaluation tools to measure their progress and the overall effectiveness of this particular iteration are needed. Another paper detailing this continued process is forthcoming. I also believe a revision of UG in terms that are applicable to the argument proposed in this paper would be a very wise thing to do. There is still much to explore about specific examples of how UG connects with environments to aid in L1 acquisition that could greatly alter the shape of this instructional unit. Such revisions will be considered during the revision/evaluation phase of the ID process. Thank you.

References

Dick, W., Carey, J.O., & Carey, L. (2009). *The Systematic Design of Instruction*. Upper Saddle River, N.J. : Merrill/Pearson

Pinker, S. (1994). *The Language Instinct*. New York City: William Morrow and Company

White, L. (2003) *Second Language Acquisition and Universal Grammar*. Cambridge University Press.

Contact email: jaimegracey@gmail.com