

Have Japanese College Students Acquired Basic English Grammar Introduced at Junior High School?

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Abstract—One of the hot topics of English language teaching in Japan is how teachers can help students acquire basic grammar items introduced at the junior high school stage. Many high school and college teachers have tried to believe that their students have already acquired basic grammar items in the junior high school textbooks. However, it is obvious from some studies that more than half the learners do not have an appropriate command of basic English grammar when they graduate from junior high school and that hinders them from making further progress. This study aims to examine what the Japanese college students' command of basic English grammar is like and what can be done to improve the situation.

Keywords—acquisition, basic grammar, instruction

I. INTRODUCTION

THIS study aims to examine how much Japanese college students acquired basic English grammar introduced at junior high school.

In language teaching and learning you need to keep in mind that students do not always learn what is taught in class. More than half the junior high school students have not acquired basic grammar items in their textbooks when they finish school. However, most high school and college teachers give detailed explanations of new grammar items and leave the class at that. They spend very little time on practicing what the students are supposed to know.

Students have very little chance to practice basic English grammar and as a result miss opportunities to acquire the command of basic grammar items even in their junior high school textbooks, which in turn makes English one of the most unfavorable school subjects for them.

This study is one of the small studies which examine to what extent Japanese learners of English have acquired basic English grammar. The study tries to reveal how much Japanese college students can listen to and reproduce English sentences which are in junior high school textbooks and to examine what causes problems for the learners to acquire basic grammar.

II. BACKGROUND

a. High School Students' Proficiency

According to a survey conducted by MEXT (the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology) in 2014 only 34.7% of junior high school students have passed

or are able to pass the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency Grade 3, which indicates the acquisition of grammar items taught at junior high school.

Kanatani, K., Kobayashi, M., Tsuge, K., Niede, Y., and Hayama, M. (2015) examined whether junior high school students can accurately identify subject noun phrases in English sentences. They reported that the percentage of the students who accurately identified subject noun phrases was only about 30%.

Kanatani, K., Usukura, M., Ota, E., Suzuki, Y., and Sumita, A. (2017) investigated the Japanese senior high school students' mastery of basic English grammar by giving them five different tests. The participants were about 5300 Japanese high school students and they were asked to take a timed reading test, a listening test, a dictation test, a translation test, and two versions of picture description test. All the sentences used in these tests were at the same difficulty level as junior high school textbooks. No words or structures were used which are more difficult than the junior high school textbook level. Kanatani et al. (2017) reported that many of the participants could not manipulate English sentences taught at junior high school. For example, in the rapid reading test less than 20% of the participants were able to read as fast as 100 wpm, and in the dictation test the number of students who succeeded in reproducing all the 18 sentences was only two out of 347. Their results revealed that many high school students have not fully acquired the basic English grammar taught at junior high school.

b. Instructions for High School Students

Senior high school English classes have some problem. In Tono (2014), the numbers of the new words and the total words in the junior high school textbooks and those in senior high school textbooks are compared. The numbers gradually become larger from the first to the second and to the third year of junior high school (Grades 7-9). However, the numbers suddenly become larger in senior high school textbooks (Grade 10 and 11). Tono (2014) also reported that there is a huge gap in readability score by the Lexile Measure between junior high school textbooks and senior high school textbooks. He concluded that the senior high school textbooks are inappropriately difficult for the majority of high school students.

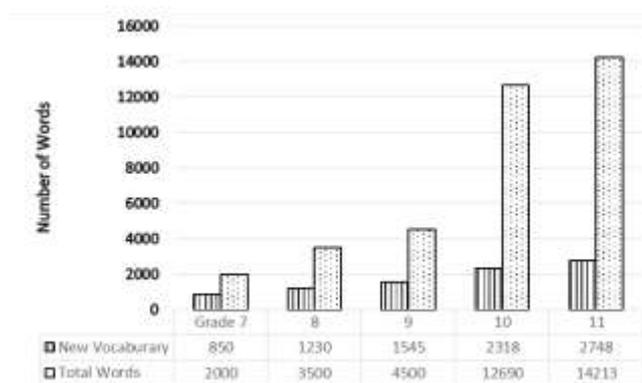


Fig. 1 Number of New Words and Total Words (Figure 1 shows the graph of the number of new words and the number of the total words in the passages in each of junior high school 1,2,3 and senior high school 1 and 2 textbooks.)

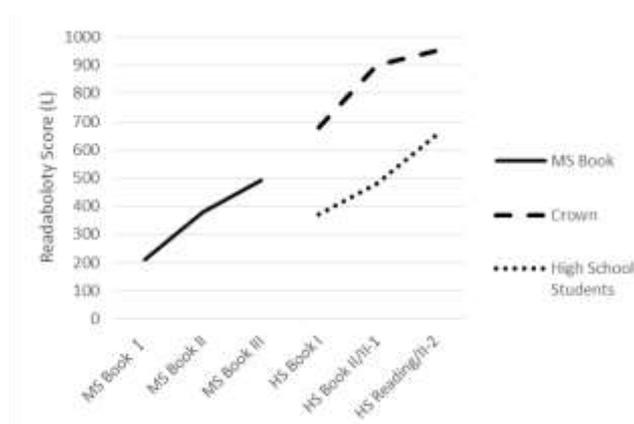


Fig. 2 Readability Scores of Textbooks and Students (Figure 2 shows the readability scores of junior and senior high school textbooks and the actual ability of an average high school student. MS Book I, II, and III are junior high school textbooks and Crown I, II-1, and II-3 are senior high school textbooks. The dotted line with the label *High School Students* shows the reading skills of an average high school student's in the first, second, and third years.)

New curriculums have been introduced to senior high school classes whose purpose is to make students fluent and accurate in basic grammar taught at junior high school. One of the suggested methods is to teach senior high school classes using texts from junior high school textbooks, which provides students with a lot of output activities. Its aim is to automatize their grammar knowledge and to improve students' productive skills. However, the majority of high school teachers still stick to the translation method and the grammar explanation and they provide their students with few activities for developing accuracy and fluency in basic grammar. Ota (2009) reported the results of a survey carried out on 261 English teachers working at junior high or senior high schools. She pointed out that teachers tend to spend little time on oral output activities. In junior high schools a little more than one-third of the fifty-minute lesson was spent on oral output activities, and only one-fourth of the time was spent on oral output activities in senior high schools. Translation method was still dominant especially in senior high school English classes.

c. Basic Grammars and Acquisition

A report published by ALC PRESS INC. in 2015 is one of

the studies which provide the evidence that acquiring basic English grammar is crucially important for learners. The research group examined the entrance examination tests of 22 universities which were employed in 2012, 2013 and 2014. About 80% of the questions can be solved with the basic grammar knowledge in the junior high school textbooks. Only 20 % of the questions targeted the grammar items which are introduced in senior high school textbooks.

III. PURPOSE

The purpose of this empirical study is to examine whether Japanese college students have acquired and retained basic English grammar introduced at junior high school.

IV. METHOD

115 freshmen at two different universities in Tokyo and Chiba participated in this study. They were divided into three groups according to the placement test scores.

The jMET(C) (Minimal English Test for junior high school students, Crown version) developed by Maki, H., Suzuki, K., Hasebe, M., Tokugawa, S., Zhang, R., Fan, L., Dunton, J., Kasai, C. (2013) was employed in this study. This test has been developed as an English proficiency measure for junior high school students. It is a kind of cloze test. Test-takers are asked to listen to passages from the junior high school textbook (named *Crown*). Every six words in the passages are blanked, and they are to fill in each blank with an appropriate word. The reading speed is 120 words per minute. There are 66 blanks and it takes five minutes to complete the test. Its validity as a measure of English proficiency is also reported.

The participants were given instructions on the test procedures in their first language, Japanese, before the test. They took the test in their regular classrooms. They listened to the passages only once and filled in each blank while listening to the CD. The participants' answers were scored by the researcher. An answer with spelling errors was not counted as a correct answer. However, answers with capital/small letter errors, for example, "we" for "We" were scored as correct. There are 66 blanks and the full mark is 66.

V. RESULTS

a. Scores of the jMET

The descriptive statistics of the jMET scores are shown in Table 1. The reliability score was .89. Figure 3 shows the histogram of the scores.

TABLE I
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF JMET SCORES (N=115)

Mean	33.1
Median	33
SD	9.6
Maximum	58
Minimum	6

The mean of the participants scores was 33.1 and the medium was 33. As Figure 3 shows, the histogram of the participants' scores forms almost symmetry. The maximum score was 58 and the minimum score was 6. 53 participants were in the score range of 6-32. About half of the participants failed to fill in more than half of the blanks correctly. None of the participants scored the full mark.

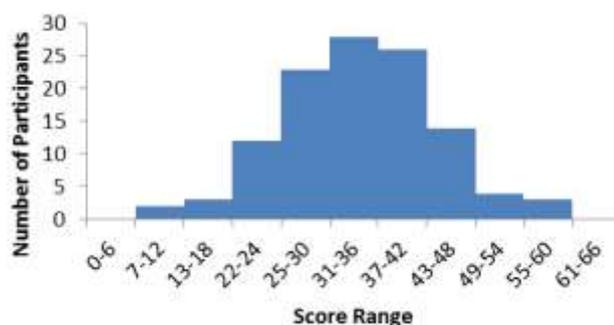


Fig. 3 Histogram of jMET scores

b. Items with Low Percentages of a correct answer and Errors that the Participants Made

There are 19 blanks where more than two thirds of the participants failed to fill with a correct answer. The researcher categorized the items which are most difficult to the participants into four groups. (See Table II)

The numbers of in the bracket are the participants who wrote the correct answer.

TABLE II
FOUR CATEGORIES OF DIFFICULT ITEMS AND ERRORS

Category	Item (# of participants)	Error
Singular/plural form	trees (6)	tree
	rings (37)	ring
	expressions (5)	expression
Form of verbs	studies (51)	study
	played (37)	play
	growing (36)	grow
	cutting (9)	cut/cutting
	taught (11)	teach/ taught
Articles, prepositions, and pronouns	of (11)	(blank)
	an (41)	a
	it (18)	(blank)
	to (29)	(blank)
	the (12)	that
Vocabulary, spellings	autumn (3)	outam/ オータム
	cover (9)	(blank)
	pasted (9)	peisted
	couldn't (21)	couldn't

Four categories are presented in Table II. The first category is singular/ plural form errors. The participants often omitted the plural *s* in the target words. The second category is verb form. The verb *played* was written in the present tense *play* and the verb in the third person singular form *studies* was written *study* by many participants. The third category is articles, prepositions, and pronouns. Some participants did not write anything in the blanks for these items and spellings errors were not found. The fourth category is vocabulary and spelling, answers written in *katakana*, and blanks were often found.

Findings of this study are as follows:

- 1) 115 Japanese freshmen's jMET scores ranged from 6 to 58 and about half of the participants failed to answer more than half of the questions correctly.
- 2) Errors of singular or plural form were observed in the participants' answers.
- 3) Errors on the verb forms were also observed. The participants sometimes wrote their answers in the present form where it should be the past tense, present participle,

or past participle.

- 4) Function words were less answered correctly than content words. They got low scores on articles, prepositions, and pronouns as well.
- 5) Some basic words were not fully acquired by the participants. Spelling errors were often observed.

VI. DISCUSSION

The mean jMET score of the participants was 33.1. The scores ranged from 6 to 58. The jMET is a proficiency test which is developed for measuring junior high school students' proficiency. The test materials are from junior high school textbooks. The participants of this study were freshmen of universities. The results indicate that about half of the freshmen who participated in this study could not answer half of the questions correctly.

The test items that more than half of the participants failed to write right answers of and their wrong answers are shown in Table II. They are categorized into four groups.

The first category, plural *s*, is one of the grammar items that Japanese learners of English are likely to have difficulty acquiring.

The second category, verb form, is also mentioned as one of the problems that the Japanese high school students have when they write English sentences. Errors of tense and aspect are often reported in Japanese learners' performances in productive tasks and tests.

The third category is articles, prepositions, and pronouns. These words convey less information than the other words such as nouns, verbs, and adverbs. They are also likely to be pronounced in unstressed forms, and many of the participants have missed the words.

The fourth category is vocabulary. The words used in this test were adopted from junior high school textbooks. However, there were some words that most of the students failed to write correctly. Especially, the participants who correctly wrote the word *autumn* were only three out of the 115. Even such an easy word as *hello* (which is not listed in Table II) was misspelled by some of the participants as *hellow* or *hallo* and the number of the participants who wrote it correctly was 93 out of 115. Not only basic grammars introduced at junior high schools but also some basic vocabulary was not fully acquired by Japanese university freshmen who participated in this study.

Overall, the basic English grammar taught at junior high school was not fully acquired by the Japanese college students. The students' low rate of acquisition of the basic grammar is strongly related to instructions in high school English classes in Japan. As mentioned in Introduction, high school textbooks are often too difficult for students. Teachers are likely to spend more time explaining the grammar items which are new for their students and translating the text rather than give activities to enhance the students' implicit grammar knowledge.

Recently, however, the idea is slowly spreading that teachers should make their students more fluent and accurate in basic grammar taught at junior high school. When high school teachers shift their focus to the fluent and accurate use of the basic grammar in their classes, more students will be proficient in English.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to examine how well Japanese freshmen have acquired basic grammar items in junior high school textbooks for junior. The results indicate that basic grammar taught at junior high school is not fully acquired by most Japanese university freshmen.

Errors observed in the participants' performance were categorized into four groups. Many of the participants made errors in singular or plural forms of nouns, forms of verbs, function words, and spelling of some basic words.

The data of this study is limited with the small number of samples and only one type of test for measuring the

participants' proficiency. However, the findings of this study can be one evidence that basic English grammar taught at junior high school cannot be acquired easily and even university freshmen have difficulty using basic grammar items and basic vocabulary.

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APPENDIX

Sample of jMET(C)

Instruction: Listen to the CD and fill each blank with the word you hear.

1. This is Daichi. He is my () in Okinawa.
2. He is a singer () folksongs. This is Yuri. She () my friend too.
3. She is () *Eisa* dancer. She is in the () club.
4. I study English. So () can speak it a little.
5. Paul () Japanese. So he can speak () a little.
.../
33. For example, my teacher () me how to sign the () "happy".
34. My hands were in () right place,
35. but the other students () understand me well. My teacher (),
36. "Smile when you sign 'happy'. () people will understand you better." () this,
37. I learned that facial () and gestures are important for ().