

〈研究ノート〉

Let Pedagogical English Grammar Be Fairly Treated in the Curriculum for English Majors

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1. Introduction

This brief report is intended to clarify a few problems that may have been posed concerning the current curriculum for English majors at Sapporo University (henceforth, SU), based on the teaching and research experience of the author, who has been a lecturer and associate professor at SU for seven years. It has been argued that grammar should be made a priority, especially for English learners at the university level desiring to score well on official English tests such as TOEIC® and EIKEN in order to study and work abroad in the future. Generally, we rely upon grammatical terms such as *infinitive*, *gerund*, *tense*, and the like to guide learners through official English tests.

The next section reviews some types of questions that appear on the official English tests popular with university students. Then, the levels of the English majors and the curriculum of SU are discussed, with profound consideration of specific cases that the author has personally come upon while teaching at SU. Finally, we suggest what should be done in the subsequent curricula to make up for what is lacking in the current one.

2. Grammar-oriented questions in official English tests

It is generally argued that the necessity of pedagogical English grammar consists in part in the fact that the questions as in (1) are shown in official English exams. The following are cited from the *TOEIC® Official Test-Preparation Guide*, published in 2016 by Educational Testing Service (ETS), which develops international English tests, such as the TOEFL® (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and the TOEIC® (Test of English for International Communication), as well as standardized tests like the GRE (Graduate Record Examination).

(1) a. Yee-Yin Xions held interviews with numerous clients to determine ----- Echegaray Consulting, Inc., can improve customer services.

- (A) unless
- (B) in order to
- (C) how
- (D) as if

(Educational Testing Service (2016: 92))

b. Maya Byun ----- by the executive team to head the new public relations department.

- (A) chose
- (B) choose
- (C) was choosing
- (D) was chosen

(Educational Testing Service (2016: 48))

It goes without saying that the overwhelming majority of TOEIC® examinees in Japan are not native speakers of English. It is fair to assume that they have limited a priori knowledge of English equivalent to their ability in their own mother tongue. This motivates most teachers to devise efficient methods for learners to use English as a second language, which should be clearly distinguished from the way they use their native languages with relative ease. For instance, if students must show how to fill the blank in (1a), they should notice that the latter half *Echegaray Consulting, Inc., can improve customer services* consists of a subject and a verb, and that nominals should follow the transitive verb *determine*. We must make full use of such terms as *subject*, *verb*, *clause*, and *transitive verb* to deal with the question, which may not be familiar to most English native speakers, unless they are linguists or multi-lingual.

This type of question also shows itself in the National Center Test for University Admissions in Japan. The next question is quoted from the test in 2017, which was taken by an estimated 500,000 Japanese high school students and others, mostly aged 17 or more.

(2) () as the leading actor in the film, Ramesh soon became a star.

- ① Choosing
- ② Having been chosen
- ③ Having chosen
- ④ To choose

(National Center for University Entrance Examinations (2017))

Examinees who appreciate the key word *participle* will be able to cope with (2). The question looks quite similar to (1b), which comes from a TOEIC® workbook.

3. The current curriculum for SU English majors and their relative levels

One can safely state that in 2013, SU made a revolutionary transition. They virtually abolished the faculties and departments that had been structuring the university for approximately 45 years, from the time of its establishment, and they launched one single faculty with 13 majors, reorganized on the basis of the previous faculties and departments, including English. The new curriculum for English majors was taken over from the preceding one, belonging to the defunct English department. However, the author was perplexed by the news at this time of the discontinuation of two basic courses: Grammar I and Grammar II. Up through 2012, we had been dealing with such questions as those in (1) and (2) in these courses. It is no exaggeration to say that we were literally deprived of the opportunity of teaching English grammar.

Coincidentally enough, since 2013, an increasing number of English majors have exhibited limited knowledge of English grammar upon entering university. Most have failed to familiarize themselves with English grammar in junior or high school, nor have they taken the National Center Tests. As indicated in Ohkawa (2015), even students with a relatively good knowledge of English grammar often misuse grammatical terms; for example, “the subject ‘the man’ *modifies* the verb ‘is’.” The student seems to have meant that “the subject *agrees with* the verb,” instead of *modifying* the verb. The following sentences in (3) led the author to reflect upon the significance of pedagogical English grammar.

- (3) a. the man swimming in the pool
b. The man is swimming in the pool.

(Ohkawa (2015: 108))

In Grammar II on one occasion, the author posed a question that was intended to obtain the reply (3b), but a student confidently replied (3a), which was incorrect. Then the author asked him whether (3a) and (3b) are syntactically different, but the student seemed to be unfamiliar with such terms as *gerunds*, *participles*, and *progressive forms*. Perhaps students in his generation were more exposed to oral English in high school than reading and grammar. Possibly in conversation, (3a) can be delivered without problem, as compassionate English speakers in the street will grasp the

intended (3b) from the context. It is probable that the student found both the sentences to have the same syntactic value and was not necessarily concerned with the presence of “is” in (3b). He seems to have believed that the two are interchangeable in any context. If only he had been fortunate enough to meet a qualified teacher that could have illustrated the syntactic dissimilarity between the sentences involved!

4. Potential solutions to underlying problems

A remarkable issue often discussed in the literature of second language acquisition is the critical period at which one can acquire another language as one’s native language. Profound argument about when the critical period falls is not the primary focus of the present report, but the author steadfastly believes that English majors studying at SU have already passed their critical period; this fact demands that we develop other special teaching methods beyond the assimilative way in which children simply acquire the skills of their mother tongue.

We point out here that it is a refined sense of the mother tongue that is desperately needed for that certain share of SU English majors who fall under the average level of academic abilities. Take the participles for example. The textbook that the author has adopted in Reading I for English freshmen at SU covers adjectives ending in *-ed* and *-ing*. This usage should be dealt with at the high school level, but unfortunately, most students were not conscious or concerned about the difference between them until the author introduced this topic in Reading I. Some students had trouble grasping the difference even in Japanese between *odorok-a-ser-u* (*surprising*) and *odorok-a-ser-areru* (*surprised*). The form in Japanese *odorok-a-ser-areru* is the passivized version of the active form *odorok-a-ser-u*, but the passivized form sounds somewhat unnatural and is rarely in daily use, often replaced with the non-causative form *odorok-u*. This linguistic fact seems to dismay students, who struggle to understand that *odorok-a-ser-areru* is logically equivalent to *odorok-u*.

Let us here reconsider the sentence presented in the National Center Test.

(4) () as the leading actor in the film, Ramesh soon became a star.

- | | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| ① Choosing | ② Having been chosen |
| ③ Having chosen | ④ To choose |

(= (2))

At the risk of sounding insistent, it should be noted that this question is intended for examinees

aged 17 or more who have graduated or are expected to graduate from high school in Japan. This question at least requires examinees to be aware of the clear-cut difference between *choosing* and *(being) chosen*. They should also bear in mind what form of the verb *choose* should be attached to the prepositional phrase *as the leading actor in the film* and whether the subject *Ramesh* is on the side of choosing (someone), i.e., *erab-u*, or being chosen (by someone), i.e., *erab-areru*.

We have thus far discussed the curriculum and the individual levels of English majors at SU and illustrated some problems and solutions for English majors who will continue to enter SU in the years to come. As he is retiring from SU in March 2017, the author must relinquish any control over what specific steps SU will take. However, this brief report will help guide the reexamination of the entire value of higher education in Japan and produce a curriculum suitable for English majors. The author believes that his seven years of teaching and research experience at SU will contribute greatly to work in a new setting, and he consistently argues for the advantages of pedagogical English grammar, no matter how it is underestimated in English education at schools, colleges, and universities.

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References

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