

The Problem Has Not Solved Yet: The Forgotten Role for Contrastive Analysis and Typology in English Language Education

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Most English teachers would see the error in the title above and say the person who made it lacked a knowledge of forming English passive structures, and he might offer a review lesson on this grammar point.

This was my initial reaction to the error, but then it occurred to me that I hear this sort of error all the time from Japanese learners of English, even though they have learned the grammar of passive structures and they use it accurately in other instances. They often produce similar errors such as *Tickets can buy at the station*. It was only because my own knowledge of Japanese was increasing that I was able to see these errors in a new light.

A Japanese speaker sees nothing wrong with *The problem has not solved yet*. One function of the passive is that it is a method for de-emphasizing the agent of a sentence and shifting focus to the patient, and the Japanese person is doing exactly this when he makes this 'error.' There are simpler ways to do this besides flipping the order of direct object and subject, expressing tense and aspect in the auxiliary verb, and changing the verb to past participle. Japanese de-emphasizes the agent in the following three ways (in addition to having a recognizable passivizing verb affix):

1. Active structures in Japanese can have the verb controlled by a topic rather than a subject. *Problem*, in the sample discussed here, could be a topic rather

than a subject acting as an agent.

2. Japanese sentences often omit a subject or agent, so you can essentially passivize a sentence just by ellipting these and making no other changes to sentence structure. In this sense, *Tickets can buy at the station* is a sentence in the passive voice.
3. Perhaps problems solve themselves. If we consider the human tendency to wait for problems to solve themselves, we may see that putting the verb *solve* in the intransitive category is not such a bad idea. It becomes a philosophical question as to what the actual agent of change is.

In fact, the Japanese verb *kaiketsu suru*, meaning to *solve*, can appear in this active voice sentence:

- a. この問題はまだ解決していない。
kono mondai wa mada kaiketsu shite-inai.
This problem yet solved has not.
(The passive verb form would be *sarete-inai*, and it too sounds appropriate to the ear of a native speaker.)

The sentence can be analyzed two ways. Either it is a sentence with an implied agent acting on the problem, or it is a matter of the verb being intransitive, that is, not needing an agent at all. Things solve themselves in the same way that steam *rises* rather than *gets raised*. Thus the sentence *The problem has not solved yet* sounds fine to a Japanese speaker, even if she is competent with English passive structures in other instances.

This may seem like a trivial matter, but there are implications for language teaching.

Firstly, it illustrates the inadequacy of simple explanations that appear obvious to native speakers of English. H.G. Widdowson once wrote that native speakers are in a sense the least qualified people to teach English as a foreign language because they have no experience in learning English as a *foreign* language. In the case discussed here, it was only the insight into mind of the Japanese speaker that led me to an understanding of the error.

This is a disturbing fact for ESL practitioners because it is difficult to get insights into the L1 knowledge of learners, especially when a group of students may have

several native languages among them. Teacher training courses have adapted themselves to these pragmatic needs, ignored matters such as L1 interference and focused on research results that provide the needed confirmation that L1 interference is negligible. Yet these research results are based on SLA studies, dominated by native speakers of English, that catch and possibly misinterpret errors like the one discussed here. It is impossible to know how many errors like *The problem has not solved yet* have been wrongly attributed in SLA research to simple explanations such as “passive not yet fully acquired.”

Perhaps the research of recent decades really does reflect the truth of SLA, but I’ve always found it curious that evidence downplaying L1 interference was so readily provided just as the ELT industry was expanding rapidly and native speakers of English began working globally as English teachers. Trends in the industry required a theory with the right evidence, and once the desired results were obtained, valuable work in contrastive analysis and language typology was largely neglected.

Secondly, this is not a problem just for researchers. How many ESL training courses these days teach anything about other languages, or case grammar? If ESL teachers know any of the fifty odd cases used in the world’s languages, they may have some vague idea of what *accusative* or *ergative* mean, but how about the *prolative* – a case marking movement by a surface or way through something? Teachers can hardly be blamed for not wanting to go near the esoteric lexicon of language typology. There is a confusing array of terminology for cases (see the Wikipedia reference), semantic roles such as agent, *experiencer*, *patient*, *force* and *instrument*, and definitions such as:

“The kind of definition of subject towards which we will be working is the following: the prototype of subject represents the intersection of agent and topic... the clearest instances of subjects, cross-linguistically, are agents which are also topics” (Comrie, 107).

Although there may be no worthwhile teaching method that requires learners to consider such things, there are some benefits for teachers in knowing the general typological differences that could cause confusion.

For example, an explanation of passive structures may be unnecessary for the learner who says *The problem has not solved yet*. What he really needs to know is

that English sentences are subject rather than topic oriented, and that subjects are rarely omitted. Acquiring grammar involves acquiring the valency rules – the number of noun phrase arguments that the verb can or must use – for thousands of individual verbs. *Solve* needs two arguments (but not its Japanese equivalent, *kaiketsu suru*), while we might accept *The problem disappeared* or *The problem faded away*, and all this has to be learned one verb at a time. This supports the view that grammar learning is integrated with all other aspects of language learning, not by learning all-purpose rules then applying them generally.

Another example is that Japanese learners often persist in making word order errors, and many teachers persist in being stumped for a reason. This is because teachers have unconsciously assumed that other languages place the same importance as English does on periphrasis – the use of word order to distinguish, for example, present from past, active from passive, or statements from questions. In fact, English is rare for how uninflected it is. Japanese is said to have a standard word order of subject, object, verb (SOV), but in actual use the word order is more flexible than in English. Important elements of a sentence can be ellipped, or moved to the front of a sentence and marked with the topicalizing particle. This is possible because the essential information is conveyed by the postpositional particles or the verb affixes. The learner makes a mistake when he fails to notice that word order matters in an English sentence because it serves the function of the particles and affixes in Japanese. The teacher makes a mistake if he does not recognize the source of the confusion.

One final example that is important to mention is an error that I have noticed in both my adult students and in my young children who live in Japan and have Japanese as their mother tongue and English as their ‘father’ tongue. At their present ages of seven and five, they have persisted for some time in applying a Japanese causative rule to English sentences. Consider sentences b. and c.

- b. Mom lets me eat chocolate.
 母は僕にチョコレートを食べさせる。
 haha wa boku ni chokoreto o tabesaseru.
- c. Mom makes me eat broccoli.

母は僕にブロッコリーを食べさせる。
haha wa boku ni burokkori o tabesaseru.

Notice that b. and c. have a different meaning in English, but Japanese speakers use the same structure in both sentences, with the verb affix *-saseru* used to mean *make* or *let*. My children, just like Japanese who learn English at a later age, use *let* in instances where they really mean *make* (it's never a matter of *letting* them eat broccoli or *making* them eat chocolate). The Japanese language does have ways to disambiguate *let* and *make*, but in most instances people are content to get the meaning from context or to just leave the speaker's intent unclear. I feel it is odd to equate forcing someone to do something with allowing someone to do something, but Japanese speakers don't seem to give it much thought.

What is interesting about his example is that it occurred in L2 learners at a very young age, even when they were acquiring their second language much like their first language – that is, with a parent providing plenty of authentic interaction and modeling of the target language. The error is obviously not a stage in the acquisition process that all learners go through. English speaking children don't make this error while acquiring their L1, and I doubt French speaking children learning English would make it because French makes the same distinction as English (Maman me *permet de* manger du chocolat. Maman me *fait* manger du brocoli).

I may be overstating the case for L1 interference here, but I believe there is some truth in my belief that the emphasis in recent decades on the pursuit of the elusive universal L2 acquisition process was somewhat convenient for a teaching industry that was oriented toward the training and employment for native speakers of English. Gaining insight into learners' L1 knowledge and thought processes is a complex and often impractical task, so there will be many who balk at the suggestion that such effort is worthwhile. This problem may never solve.

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