
Computer Assisted Instruction in Teaching Grammar

TAK UEMURA

CALL can aid Japanese students in learning traditional courses such as grammar. Japanese students spend years studying how to use grammar but still cannot produce grammatically correct English. I recommend using the following program to teach grammar as it provides a CD-ROM and CD with interactive exercises that allow students to work independently at their own pace. Students were very positive about the course as was shown in a short survey that I conducted in which they were allowed to choose as many appropriate answers as they liked. A total of 70 students participated in the survey. Although less than half found the textbook helpful, over 70% enjoyed grammar exercises through listening. And in the case of the CD-ROM, students found the computer-assisted class fun and entertaining because they enjoyed taking the initiative in exploring the language. Now they are happy to do more active grammar. If students want to master a target language, then they have to be actors or actresses. They have to take the initiative in guiding themselves; they have to be involved and learn actively on their own. CALL reduces passive learning activity and so students' language will be improved.

The Traditional Learning Habit

There are several reasons for the success of this grammar course. Needless to say, multimedia language materials provide alternatives for students to explore. First of all, the multimedia grammar CD-ROM is capable of providing information via different sources. For example, students can click onto a video button and see the actual scenes in context including gesture and body language. This is certainly a great opportunity for language teachers to show what is possible and what the students have really missed in their past years of learning. It enables the students to see that the written text is actually different from what they hear in reality—that is to say, real language which real people use outside the classroom. If you can persuade them about this important fact, then the rest will follow the path that you have arranged, but you must make sure the materials you are using are meaningful to the students. Anything you try that makes no sense to them is only a waste of your time and energy. By the end of the course, whenever they had to check the answers for their CD-ROM exercises, most students checked with their ears first rather than their eyes. This is certainly a remarkable step considering the fact that they have been trained to receive information visually as far as English is concerned. Their positive attitude is obviously reflected in the survey.

Knowing the Difference of Language Rhythm

What is so unique about the CD-ROM is the fact that the language in these exercises is coded in chunks, meaningful units transmitted visually and orally like verses in karaoke. Each language has its own rhythm, just like a piece of music. If the lyrics are out of tune with the right rhythm, then listeners will have a difficult time understanding the meaning of a song. Each language has its own melody, its own rhythm. For example, English has stressed-syllable rhythm while Japanese is timed-syllable rhythm, as in Katakana English. If one uses the timed-syllable rhythm to say the following English word, MacDonald, it will be MA-KU-DO-NA-RU-DO, a six syllable word. To a listener with stress-syllable rhythm, this string of noise may sound like “Mac do nothing” or “Make a noodle.” Obviously, the listener is trying to make sense out of it with his own melody. What we need to convey to our students is the fact that whether they read or say something in English, they have to use the right melody. As long as the melody is right, then most likely you can get your meaning across even if your pronunciation is very poor. It is the correct rhythm that helps people understand each other.

CD-ROMs and audio tapes can help you retain what you have learned if you use them correctly. I sometimes see young Japanese students trying hard to memorize words they are looking at in textbooks. When I see this scene I feel sad as I think of the damage they are doing to their young minds. They will probably be imprinting wrong pronunciation which will remain there forever. For example, many Japanese mispronounce the word “two.” They say “*tsu*” because when they first learned “two,” they learned and remembered the katakana “*tsu*.” In this, Japanese are not the only victims, foreigners also make the same mistake, even though they have been in Japan for many years and are speaking Japanese almost every day. For example, many foreigners mis-pronounce the Japanese “*o*” as it is used in “*no*.” Instead of saying *watashi no daigaku*, they lengthen the *o* to say something that sounds like *noh*. Why do they make such a simple and obvious mistake? Because when they studied Japanese, most foreigners learned from textbooks using Romaji. In Romaji, *no* is written *no*, which is pronounced *noh*. It is very important to listen to correct English, so that when you speak you use the correct English you have just been listening to. A CD-ROM is excellent for this because you can watch the facial expressions, gestures, and tone of voice—a perfect model right in front of you on your screen. If you want to focus on the listening part alone, then you can turn off the video clips with the magic of CD-ROM. This is another reason why it is so important to make listening one of the main focuses of your English language study.

What is the Role of CD and CD-ROM in a Grammar Class?

Just like CD-ROMs, audio tapes have many advantages. For one thing, you can listen to them over and over again anywhere you like. You are not distracted by the teacher’s presence, so you can concentrate on the sound better. Some students who do use tapes complain that they make little progress. There are several reasons for this:

- 1) The content of commercially produced tapes is often boring.
- 2) Most students who listen to audio tapes also look at a textbook. Teachers think that this reinforces visually the impression students are receiving aurally. In fact, it weakens the aural impression. They begin processing everything in the conscious brain when they should be using the other part of the brain they use when they listen to music. To avoid this from happening, teachers can tell the students in advance what to listen for with their textbooks closed. With CD-ROMs, students have more choices to select from. This could be another factor explaining why they do not get bored so easily. They are constantly involved either with their fingers, ears, or eyes.

3) Some people think that if they listen to a voice and can understand it, then that is enough. But if they want to make a firm imprint in their brain, they also need to practice whatever they have heard as often as they can in their own speech if they want to make a firm imprint in their brain. There are some CD-ROM exercises that can actually record your voice and compare it with the original speaker. You can see the difference in production of speech in terms of a graph. Many people feel, however, that such "listening" is not very useful. It is better if the students are involved in some sort of task as they listen. Perhaps students should not worry so much about their poor pronunciation. They should speak with their own accent. How can this be done? First you listen carefully to the way native speakers speak. Then you simply try to say the same thing, but using your own "music."

Conclusion

Listening and speaking are the kinds of things most Japanese students do not do in their six years of learning English. I firmly believe that the way I conduct my lessons entirely in English and the new learning environment using CALL software have changed students' attitude to learning. Many of them have realized the need to change their old habits of learning a foreign language. Rather than focusing on a lack of English vocabulary, talking about the language, or translating English to Japanese, they need to stress that the key to improving their speaking ability is to take a lot of listening courses. Once students are confident in their listening, then speaking will follow. How did I convince my students? Of course, with the help of CD-ROM multimedia and CD grammar exercises.

Acknowledgements

I wish to express my thanks to both Bruce Monk and Thomas Jaques for reading my paper.

References

Azar Interactive—A Multimedia Grammar Experience Prentice Hall
Impact Grammar-Grammar Through Listening Longman

Appendix

Some of the questions on the questionnaire were:

1. Subject matter was presented in an interesting and stimulating way.
2. CD-ROM materials were clear and straightforward.
3. Lessons were well organized.
4. CD-ROM materials were presented at a level appropriate to student ability and preparation.
5. CD-ROM materials stimulated and encouraged independent thinking.

Students had to circle one of the following choices:

(Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly disagree, Not applicable)