Improving writing through X-Word grammar

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X-ワード・グラマーを通じてのライティングの向上

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Abstract

Students' English proficiency and ability to use grammar accurately continues to be a concern in Japan. At Osaka Jogakuin University in spite of a well-organized grammar program, we still would like to help students apply their grammar in practical situations. X-Word grammar and the classroom application of sector analysis may be able to help writing and grammar teachers empower their students by showing them how to practically apply their grammar knowledge. This paper provides some of the basics of X-Word grammar and provides resources for teachers to learn more.

抄　　録

　学生の英語運用能力と文法力は、まさに日本における継続した懸念である。大阪女学院大学においては、非常によく組織されたグラマー・プログラムが存在するが、それでもなお教員は実際的な状況において学生が文法を用いることを促進したいと考えている。X ワードのクラス適用のセクター分析は、学生にどのように彼らの文法知識を実践的に応用するかを提示することによって、ライティングとグラマーの教員が学生の英語力を強化する際の一助になりうるであろう。

Empowering students through X-Word grammar

In recent years teachers at Osaka Jogakuin University (OJU) and Osaka Jogakuin College (OJC) have informally bemoaned the impression that students' English proficiency has seemed to be going down. Although students have studied English for six years and have

had grammar classes, the performance of many make teachers wonder if they have forgotten everything they have been taught. And it is not just in the area of grammar; students' writing sometimes appears to have not been edited and has simple subject-verb agreement and tense errors. Although these discussions around the water cooler are anecdotal, there seems to be some data that suggest English proficiency is not improving at the rate the government would like. The proficiency ratio (Grade 3 or higher) in 2016 for third-year junior high students was 36.4 percent, far short of the goal of 50%. The proficiency ratios (of Eiken pre-1 or higher) for teachers "remain well below the ministry's target of 75 percent for high school and 50 percent for junior high school teachers by fiscal 2017" (Aoki, 2017). Japan's English Proficiency Index (EPI) was 26 out of 60 countries as reported in the third EF Education First English Proficiency Rating. The study based on data gathered form 2007 to 2009 found that Japan's English skills have declined slightly (Japan ranks, 2014).

At OJU/OJC the need to address some students' low English proficiency has been addressed in the new university curriculum that was implemented in 2016, and the new college curriculum that was implemented in 2017. Both curriculums created programs that had special classes designed to help lower proficiency students both by giving them special, coordinated classes, and allowing them more time to complete their basic English studies (See Cline et al., 2016). One of the special courses in both programs is focused on grammar (Foundation Grammar in OJU, Essential Grammar in OJC).

But helping students move beyond a knowledge of grammar to being able to apply grammar with confidence has eluded us regardless of the hard efforts of the faculty teaching grammar and the extra programs offered such as English Strategies (a series of elective courses focusing on TOEIC skills) and a TOEIC camp (a three-day overnight program also focusing on TOEIC skills). One challenge is that many grammar textbooks in Japan take a linguistics approach and are structured around teaching main areas of grammar, so drawing from one textbook we take students through *Words and Their Functions, Sentence and Form, Tense and Aspect, Relation and Modification, Real or Unreal, Active and Passive, Space and Time, Things and Reference,* etc. (Tera, Chihara, & Ishida, 2014). These are important areas of grammar but may be better suited to a linguistics approach than in helping students apply grammar to English tasks from day one such as making questions accurately, being able to write so that subjects and verbs are in agreement, editing drafts of their writing, or analyzing how reading texts are organized.

What would English education look like if there was an approach to grammar that could be applied to grammar classes, writing classes, and reading classes; could be effectively taught by teachers and easily learned by students; and that had consistent rules with no exceptions? There may be such a system. It is called X-Word grammar and it may help serious English programs empower their students by giving them the tools to edit their writing and analyze

what they read.

X-Words and X-Word Grammar

X-Words/X-Word grammar can be defined as "the classroom applications of the sector analysis of English to written sentences" (Kunz, n.d.). It refers to a pedagogical grammar based on a system of tagmemic-like analysis called Sector Analysis as set forth by Robert L. Allen at Teachers College at Columbia University in the 1960s and 70s. Tageme refers to the smallest meaningful unit of grammatical form. Pedagogical grammars are grammars that go beyond analysis to form rules that are "definite, coherent, non-technical, cumulative and heuristic" (Odlin, 1994).

Allen developed sector analysis (a structural grammatical system used for language analysis and teaching) because of his experiences teaching ESL in a high school in Turkey. He came to the realization that "traditional prescriptive grammars" did not provide a "pedagogically useful analysis" of the language. "His search for a more accurate and efficacious understanding led to his development of Sector Analysis" (Kurland, 2000).

Grammar in a writing course

X-Word grammar is a grammar that focuses on written English and it fits the criteria that Kunz lays out regarding what a grammar should do for a writing course:

1. The grammar should describe modern Standard English-not Latin, not all the languages of the world.
2. It should pertain explicitly to the written form of the language.
3. It should take meaning into account.
4. It should be complete and accurate enough to hold up to a linguist's examination but also be translatable to classroom terms and techniques. In other words, there should be a full version for the teacher as well as an abridged, practical version-or at least the possibility of one-for the student.
5. It should be teachable-or better, learnable-through the use of students' intuition, or "ear," for what sounds right or wrong.
6. The student version should minimize terminology, symbols, and abstractions.
7. It should be immediately applicable to students' own sentences.
8. It should yield some improvements in student writing very quickly [Kunz, n.d., pp. 65-66].

Sector analysis assumptions

X-Word is a grammar that builds upon the assumptions contained within sector analysis that show the importance of teaching grammar, some of which are listed as follows:

1. Although written and spoken English have similarities, they are different each with its own

"rules."

2. English grammars much be easy to teach even to elementary students if they are to be worth a teacher spending time on.

3. For grammars to be useful, they must be able to address not only words but also constructions [larger syntactic units that can combine into an infinite number of sentences.]

4. The grammar must allow for different interpretations when faced with ambiguous sentences like *My brother wrote a poem on Thanksgiving Day*.

5. It must recognize that English sentences have one basic, overall order and the sense of that order is shared by all native speakers of the language.

6. It acknowledges that meaning is an integral part of language and thus cannot be ignored [Allen, 1972].

As we look at the specifics of X-Word grammar we will see that as it meets both the criteria for grammars that suit writing courses and the assumptions underlying sector analysis; thus, if one accepts that the assumptions underlying sector analysis will help with grammar teaching, X-Word grammar will be very appealing for Osaka Jogakuin in that it presents grammar that has already been studied by students, in a manner that is easy to apply consistently and with a high rate of accuracy.

McLellan (2010) who worked with remedial learners at Greenfield Community College for 40 years, reports on how X-Word grammar helped a variety of learners to pass a developmental English class allowing them to move on to the basic English class and other college-level courses. She provides a succinct overview of what X-Word grammar is: "a sentence-level editing method based on locating X-Words and using yes/no questions to identify sentence parts (fragments, trunks, subjects, verbs, etc. and sentence patterns (simple compound, complex, and compound-complex). Note: a trunk is X-Word grammar's term for a basic sentence. As an editing method, X-Word grammar can be taught as a series of techniques in which the X-Words serve as markers that help writers to edit their own papers for fragments, run-on sentences, comma splices, subject-verb agreement, pronoun reference, verb types and tenses, sentence variety, and punctuation. This type of editing is especially useful for proofreading written work that is generally assigned in high school, college courses, or in the workplace" (McLellan, 2010, p 4).

What are the X-Words?

The X-Words are basically the 21 auxiliary or helping verbs. A common way of learning (and remembering the X-Words) is to organize them according to "family" or type and to teach them to the tune of Jingle Bells.

Table 1

The X-Words

Do	Have	Be		Modals	
Do	Have	Am	Can	Ought to	
Does	Has	Is	Could	Must	
Did	Had	Are	Shall	Might	
		Was	Should	May	
		Were	Will		
			Would		

The X-Words are important because they are used to:

1) ask questions,

2) make negative statements

3) find the subject of a sentence

4) change tense

5) add meaning

It is interesting to note that the foundation program at OJU has already been using sentence cards where students write an affirmative sentence and then transform it into its negative, and question form. This fits with an X-Word approach.

X-Word applications

Once students are familiar with the X-Words there are several "rules" they can consistently apply as every sentence has a subject and an X-Word. For example, if a student can identify the X-Word in a sentence, she can also identify the subject which will be everything to the left of the X-Word be it one word or a longer phrase. If the sentence does not have an X-Word, it is a fragment, something it is useful for writing students to be able to identify. (Note: do, does, did are considered invisible X-Words. They are in the underlying structure of a sentence.) By moving the X-Word in front of the subject, she can make a question. The two columns on the right in Table 1 (the modal columns) can only be followed by the base form of verbs, never by -ing or past participles. The "be" column of X-Words is usually followed by -ing form of verbs though it can be followed by past participles when the passive form is used. The "have" column X-Words are generally followed by the past participle form of verbs though it too can be followed by a form of "be" when forming the passive. These "rules" are ones that can be unfailingly applied when students edit their writing, and as such can be empowering to students.

The above are just a few examples of ways students can begin to correct their errors on their own after a brief introduction to X-Word grammar. As Sue Livingston, an educator and

author who uses X-Word grammar in her work with deaf students at LaGuardia College, writes, "Learning how to correct these errors independently (which is very doable) will help them to grammatically analyse lexical chunks and remember more easily" (Livingston, 2002, p. 52). Livingston goes on to write other ways X-Words empower students. For example, X-Words can help with time as they can be used to show what is referred to as "Before time" and "Now time." They can also be used to show how many as they can be put into two categories; One and Many. Only X-Words that end in "s" go with singular subjects (does, has, is, was).

Another example of the way X-Word grammar organizes ideas in a way that students can apply is in its approach to coordinating conjunctions. Although this is not only used in X-Word grammar, it is a mnemonic that helps students pick a conjunction. The mnemonic is FANBOYS which helps one remember the coordinating conjunctions: for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so.

And, X-Word grammar uses what it calls boxes to show "the places where nouns live." (Livingston, 2002, p. 73). Nouns are found in boxes with adjectives, possessive pronouns (*my, your, his*), possessive nouns (*Ann's*), and determiners like *a* or *the* or *a few* or *many*. As nouns are the most important words in the box, X-Word grammar has learners find the nouns in the boxes and star them to show their importance (Livingston, 2002).

X-Words and sentence patterns

Finally, X-Word grammar also has a consistent system for treating sentence patterns. X-Word grammar calls simple sentences "trunks" because as Kunz (2004) suggests sentences are "the core of every written English statement or question,...it is as stable and crucial to the life of a sentence as a trunk is to a tree." Trunks are comprised of two positions: a subject position and a predicate position. There are seven sentence patterns in X-Word grammar and they are found in any text and are useful for editing sentence structure mistakes and also teaching punctuation. Bonny Hart, who helps maintain a wiki page focused on helping teachers use X-Word grammar (Hart, n.d.), has a Prezi presentation entitled Essential Sentence Patterns that lists the trunks and provides examples for each:

Trunk (T.)

The orange bird is singing her song.

One Trunk with Two or More verbs (Tvv.)

The bird is sitting in a tree and singing.

Trunk plus Trunk (T, + t.)

The little bird is singing in the tree, and the earth is coming alive.

Trunk with an End Shifter (T es.)

Birds sing in the spring.

Trunk with a Front Shifter (Fs, t.)

In the spring, birds sing.

Trunk with an insert (an insert can be a middle insert or an end insert) (T, i, t.) or (T, i.)

The little bird, a beautiful dark orange, sang her song.

The little bird sang her song, welcoming the spring.

Trunk with a linker (T; l, t.), or (T. L, t.) which is shown.

I have heard the red bird for many springs now. However, its song still fills me with hope.

Conclusion

The potential strength in teaching our students to use X-Word grammar in editing their writing is they will be able to grammatically analyze all of their writing. The potential advantages of integrating X-Word grammar in a content-based curriculum like that at OJ are exciting. This excitement about X-Word grammar comes through as Livingston ends her chapter that introduces X-Word grammar with:

Take a moment to imagine how X-Word Grammar might look if it were used across the curriculum. I envision content-area teachers talking about key concepts (chunks of information) in their discipline, and, as they are talking, writing key phrase on the board, quickly boxing those phrases that are noun boxes, staring the noun in the box, pointing out the adjectives within. They are boxing subjects and labeling X-Words and verbs for agreement. Imagine, for homework, asking students to write a brief summary of what they learned during a particular lecture or devising some more creative writings assignment to cement new learning. With grammar overlaid on content language, with opportunities to understand the grammatical underpinnings of the phrase they need to know for a course, in their majors, Deaf students [or EFL students—comment added] would surely have an easier time writing in their respective disciplines (p. 76).

Piloting X-Word grammar writing and grammar classes will show to what degree students can become empowered, independent editors of their written work. To help teachers who want to delve deeper into X-Word grammar, this paper ends with a series of resources.

Resources for interested teachers

- What is x-word grammar?
  http://xwordgrammar.pbworks.com/w/page/27376414/What%20is%20X-Word%20Grammar
  An extensive Wiki site with a wide-range of resources such as lesson plans, articles, books, and video/Prezi presentations.
- Lydon, J., Gex, J., & Hart, B. (n.d.) *Xword Grammar for Students of English as a Second Language* is an online pdf book that is ready to be used by students.
  It is part of the What is x-word grammar? Site and is available at:
  http://xwordgrammar.pbworks.com/w/page/7067848/Lydon

- What is it? [n.d.] X-Word Grammar. Retrieved from http://www.xwordgrammar.com

  Another webpage that gives a brief, but succinct explanation of x-word grammar linking the sentence patterns to SVO. It posits that X-Word grammar can "fix problems like run-ons, fragments, errors with subject-verb agreement and verb forms, and much more."

- Livingson, S. [2002]. *Working Text: Teaching Deaf and Second-Language Students to be Better Writers*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

  A well-written book that takes the reader through x-word grammar by applying it to a draft of an essay as it goes through three separate revisions. The book also has a student workbook [with all the answers in this main text].

- Deakins, A.H., Parry, K., Viscount, R. [1994]. *The Tapestry Grammar: A Reference for Learners of English*. New York: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

  Part of the Tapestry Series edited by Rebecca Oxford and Robin Scarcella, it appears to be a straight reference grammar text until you dig deeper and see that it is presenting grammar from an x-word perspective.

- Pires, D., & Khodabakhshi, S. [2015]. *Grammar Write: An ESL Text-workbook*. Middletown, DE: Grammar Works Publishing.

  A textbook for high-intermediate and low-advanced students. It states its goal as helping students become effective language users, not grammar instructors. It explicitly uses x-word grammar in its various units.

- Allen, R.L., Pompian, R., & Allen, D. [1975]. *Working Sentences*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.

  One of the original classroom application books for sector analysis. It helps students produce edited English and is construction orientated rather than word-oriented.

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