



Explaining Grammatical Form as a Sequenced Process: A Semantic-based Pedagogical Grammar

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Introduction

In Japan, despite English language classes being compulsory from the fifth grade in elementary school, the number of language learners who finish their education with actual English ability is surprisingly low. In a recent survey, 72% of Japanese, aged 20 to 49 years old, responded they could hardly speak English (Hojo, n.d.). For L2 learners in Japan, there are a number of hurdles to increasing fluent L2 use. To begin with, for some the general lack of English and a relatively weak link between career success and English ability (Kubota, 2011) hinder L2 achievement. However, for all L2 learners in Japan the essential focus on grammar and traditional metalanguage to success on high-stakes entrance tests has tipped “the central dilemma” of language teaching (Richards, 2002) towards traditional grammar instruction making it difficult for teacher to strike the right balance between grammar and subject matter content.

Focus-on-forms and focus-on-form (FonF) are used to describe how the central dilemma’s balancing act plays out pedagogically. Focus-on-forms is a more traditional approach to balancing English grammar (Burns, 2016) and classroom content and centers the class on grammatical units. This approach is still widely practiced in many parts of the world (Nguyen et al., 2017), however, much second language acquisition research has shown that a focus-on-forms pedagogy neither resembles how language is used nor leads to the mastery of the L2 (Long & Robinson, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2001).

L2 learners benefit from understanding form as it arises from content (Hatch, 1978) however, information-processing capacity makes it difficult to simultaneously process and produce forms (VanPatten, 1990). Additionally, shifting learners’ attention away from content for an extended period of time damages conversational coherence (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). Accordingly, Long and Robinson (1998) developed FonF as a way for L2 teachers to mainly focus on classroom content, yet still attend to grammatical form. FonF involves briefly directing learners’ attention away from content in order to focus on grammatical form. These brief breaks are most effectively done explicitly via metalinguistic terms (Saito & Lyster, 2012), after which the learners’ attention is redirected back to content to preserve conversational cohesion. Spada (1997) viewed the advantage of FonF as providing grammatical form instruction at the moment learners required it most. However, traditional metalanguage explanations are primarily terminology based (Berry, 2010) and for many learners do not facilitate or explain the process

of L2 grammatical form use nor aid in promoting fluent L2 output.

This article presents an alternative approach to explicitly teach L2 grammar by introducing a Meaning-order Approach to Pedagogical Grammar (MAP or MAP Grammar) (Tajino, 2018). MAP Grammar's provides pedagogic scaffolding to develop a process-based understanding of the L2 by treating grammatical forms as a sequenced process of meaning-making that strengthens the form-to-meaning connections and simultaneously promotes fluent L2 use.

A Meaning-order Approach to Pedagogical Grammar

MAP Grammar is rooted theoretically in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday, 1985b; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Halliday, Matthiessen, & Matthiessen, 2013) and was initially conceived of by Akira Tajino (2018) at Kyoto University in Kyoto, Japan. MAP Grammar does not use the traditional approach to describing English grammar since it relies heavily on traditional metalanguage based terms and explanations which introduce an additional barrier between learners and meaningful L2 content. Instead, MAP Grammar employs a semantic-roles-based process to explain how the clause can be used in a way that merges form, function, and meaning.

Halliday (1994) ranked the clause at the top of the grammatical hierarchy, whereas in traditional grammar the sentence is the largest grammar unit (see Table 1). Halliday accounted for the functional organization of sentences via a clause complex, which he defined as a main clause accompanied by other clauses that modify it.

TABLE 1
Hierarchy of Grammar Units

| Traditional Grammar | Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Sentence (composed of 1 or more clauses) ↓ Clause (composed of 1 or more phrases) ↓ Phrase (composed of 1 or more words) ↓ Word | Clause (composed of 1 or more word groups) ↓ Word group (composed of 1 or more words) ↓ Word |

According to Halliday, a clause functionally expresses a single "communicative event" (Halliday, 1994, p. 37) and is composed of two fixed ordered elements, specifically the theme and the rheme (Halliday, 1985a). The theme is always the first element in the order and specifies the primary topic for the clause. English speakers, intentionally or otherwise, tend to put the most functionally important information in the theme, whereas the rheme is the part of a clause that supplies supportive information about the theme. The relationship between the theme and rheme helps create a sense of continuity in a text. A text is "language that is doing some job in some context" (Halliday & Hasan, 1985, p. 10). A text has continuity, not simply due to the repetition in the theme and rheme, but because of how these two elements are interrelated throughout the whole text. This interrelationship reorders the sequences of syntagm, a linguistic unit consisting of a set of linguistic forms that are in a sequential relationship to one another, about the entire text.

The text in Table 2 came from a three year old story teller (Halliday & Hasan, 1985) with a sequence of syntagms for 'a little girl' first presented in the rheme and then transferred to the theme as 'she'. Despite the change in lexicality, this syntagm still represents the same linguistic unit of 'a little girl'. In order to achieve continuity, a text must repeat a given sequence of syntagms (equating to the same linguistic unit) in the same element on at least two occasions and this must occur in both the theme and the rheme

(Halliday & Hasan, 1985). The text in table 2 exceeds this requirement and maintains continuity because different sequenced syntagms within both the theme and rheme sufficiently appear in the same element throughout different clauses in the text.

TABLE 2
Related Syntagm Between and Within Elements

| Theme | Rheme |
|------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Once there 1 | was a little girl 4 |
| and she 1 | went out for a walk 2 |
| and she 1 | saw a lovely teddy bear 3 2 5 |
| and so she 1 | took it home 3&4&5 2 4&5 |
| and when she 1 | got it home 2 |
| she 1 | washed it 3 2 |
| and she 1 | had the teddy bear for many many weeks and years |
| 1. she-she-she-she-she | 2. bear- it-it-it-it-bear, 3. took-got-had (possession), 4. went out-got home, 5.home-home (adapted from Halliday & Hasan, 1989) |

Within MAP Grammar sequenced syntagms are bound together into a single meaningful linguistic unit based solely on their semantic meaning. The meaning constructed is the only yardstick for determining if sequential syntagm are involved in a syntagmatic relationship and thus bound together. Since this relationship between sequential syn-*tag*-m configures MAP's semantic analysis, and in keeping with the simplicity universal to the pedagogy here after, it will be referred to as a 'tag'. MAP Grammar groups sequential syntagms under one of six tags; α (alpha), *Who*, *Does*, *What*, *Where*, and *When*. For example, in the rheme of the third clause of Table 2, the sequential syntagms of "a lovely teddy bear" would be bundled together by a single functional semantic *What* tag and placed within MAP Grammar's sequenced order. This fix order sequence of tags represents the fixed order of the two elements and pedagogically allows for classroom content, semantic function and grammatical form to be explained and discussed as a sequenced process of meaning making.

MAP Grammar Tags

MAP Grammar's six tags begin with the only non-self-descriptive tag, the alpha (α) which has two roles within the theme, the first is as a connector and the second within interrogatives. The first role for the α tag is to show how clauses on either side of it are semantically related to each other, see Ex 1 and 2. An α tag in this role usually consists of a single syntagm, i.e., if, so, and etc. and can sign posts learners' L2 level since beginner learners rarely employ them, intermediate learners favor them, and advanced learners tend to replace them with nominal groups. For clarity, syntagm that have a semantic connection will be tagged into a syntagmatic relationship above and underlined.

Ex 1: α Who Does What α Does What When α Who Does What When
I want to go and eat lunch now because I have a meeting at one.

Ex. 2: α Who Does When Who Does What Where
If you arrive before six, I can meet you at the station.

The second role of the α tag is with interrogatives where it makes apparent how a question is constructed. The α tag is positioned in front of the clause with the targeted answer being marked by the tag name used in the body of the question, see Ex. 3 and 4.

- Ex. 3. Q: α Who Does what Where
Where did you put my wallet wallet? A: On the table.
- Ex. 4. Q: α What Who
Who is an doctor? A: Bill's father.

Still within the theme, the *Who* tag represents the origin of actions, feelings, or existence in the clause. The α and *Who* tag serve at the beginning of a sequence of hierarchical information and they characterize and influence all the details presented later in the sequence. The remaining tags *Does*, *What*, *Where*, *When*, make up the rheme. The *Does* tag indicates to the audience what activities the *Who* is undertaking, and through tense aides in communicating the timing of those activities. The *What* tag could be a person, thing or how an activity is carried out and represents anything the *Who* has acted upon. Finally, the *Where* and *When* tags communicate the location and time the *Who* was engaged in an activity.

As started above, the theme and rheme create the ordered sequence of English. MAP Grammar represents this as a reoccurring, pedagogically-oriented sequence of tags, namely α (alpha), *Who*, *Does*, *What*, *Where*, and *When* ad infinitum. As an example, see Table 3.

TABLE 3
MAP Grammar Analysis

| Theme | Rheme |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| α Who <u>The bouquet toss</u> | Does What Where Where <u>is a well-known tradition at weddings in the West</u> |
| α Who <u>and its fame</u> | Does What What Where <u>has earned it a spot in many Japanese receptions.</u> |
| Who <u>It</u> | Does What <u>is said</u> |
| α Who <u>that the one who catches the</u> | Does What What What <u>will be the next to get married.</u> |
| α Who <u>bouquet</u> | Does Where What What <u>gather around the bride to catch it .</u> |
| α Who α who <u>so unmarried women</u> | Does What <u>is a fun tradition.</u> |
| α Who α Who <u>But while the bouquet for some</u> | Does <u>being singled out</u> |
| α Who <u>for others</u> | Does α Does <u>is insulting and embarrassing</u> |
| α Who <u>as a single lady</u> | |

Adapted from: Japan times, June 17, 2018.

For L2 learners and teachers, what is important is simply recognizing the reoccurring sequenced process involved in clause construction of α , *Who*, *Does*, *What*, *Where*, *When* and adopting it into L2 analysis and output.

Pedagogic Use of Tags

Pedagogically, MAP tags are used to improve the form-to-meaning connection, operationalize the syntagmatic order of the language, and analyze a text.

Firstly, MAP tags employ a semantic, meaning-ordered approach to explaining the L2 that improves learners' understanding of form-to-meaning connections. MAP Grammar's tagging process closely aligns classroom content, semantic function and grammatical form. For example, a *Does* tag might grammatically just consist of a verb, as in 'get', whereas to properly tag a noun infinitive as a *What* requires 'to' plus the verb form as in 'to get', and this semantic depiction of action then needs to be checked against an understanding of content. This establishes a triple-checking process in which form, function and meaning are aligned allowing learners to triangulate grammatical correctness. In class error correction is also important because classroom discussions of form are always related back to the function the tag assumes in context facilitating multiple opportunities to understand how classroom content is functioning through grammatical form. In summary, MAP Grammar can greatly increase grammatical

correctness by using MAP tags to highlight semantic function and cross referencing it with grammatical form and content.

Secondly, MAP tags put into operation the sequential order of the language, theme then rheme. Having a consistent ordered sequence of information to follow creates an advantage since learners know where to begin to understanding L2 meaning or create L2 output. Following a sequenced order of tags reduces and predetermines many linguistic decisions and directs learners' attention to a sequence of functional options necessary for grammatically correct output. Gray (2018) argues the ordered sequence and classroom content mutually support each other since even if learners make a minor grammatical error, they can be confident they will be understood since the proper syntagmatic sequence supports learners' fundamental idea and a shared understanding of content provides vital support to missing detail.

Finally, tags provide a means to both quantitatively and qualitatively analyze text. Quantitatively analysis begins by counting the number of words, clauses, tags, clause complexes (CC) and original tag constructions in a text and then calculating a series of ratios (Table 4).

TABLE 4

Quantitative Analysis of Text with MAP Grammar Tags

| Tag | # of tags | Original tag constructions | Word/tag | Tag/clause | Tag/CC | Word/tag |
|-------|-----------|----------------------------|----------|------------|--------|----------|
| Alpha | 7 | 89% | 1.50 | 0.75 | 2.00 | 11% |
| Who | 9 | 89% | 2.63 | 1.00 | 2.67 | 28% |
| Does | 9 | 67% | 1.33 | 1.13 | 3.00 | 16% |
| What | 10 | 70% | 2.63 | 1.00 | 2.67 | 28% |
| Where | 4 | 100% | 2.60 | 0.63 | 1.67 | 17% |
| When | 0 | - | - | - | - | - |

This analysis shows tag construction in the text is rarely repeated with the majority of the text split equally between the *Who* and *What* tags. In general, increases in words per tag and in tags per clause, or clause complex, can be associated with increased text complexity. Qualitatively, the tags can show how the semantic function is represented grammatically within the content. In Figure 3, a central tag of the theme is the *Who* tag for a single woman, grammatically this is represented through a noun phrase (unmarried women), a prepositional phrase (for others), and a relative pronoun (the one who catches the bouquet) but in terms of content and function these forms are represented by the same *Who* tag within the text.

Paradigmatic Stacking

The above discussion highlighted the syntagmatic sequence, the horizontal mapping of sequential meaning between different tags in MAP Grammar. In contrast, paradigmatic stacking represents the vertical stacking of the same tag within a clause and is a direct result of adapting the language to its intended function.

Ex. 5.0. My older son has been happy to drive his girlfriend all around town all summer.

Who Does What What What Where When

The *What* tag in Ex 5 is used three-fold and this represents the importance the parent is placing on the items their son has been spending his time upon. Through paradigmatic stacking the *What* tag becomes more functionally significant since the intentional repetition conveys a range of complex emotions ranging from happiness to worry to exacerbation and demonstrates the function of the tagged content. As learners respond more to the functional purposes of the language, they begin to modify the MAP clause to

its function, and create clause complexes while at the same time maintaining a connection to the original clausal construction thereby insuring grammatical correctness.

Error Correction within MAP Grammar

MAP Grammar's focus on error correction is one of the pedagogy's major strengths and to this end, Burt (1975) makes a vital dichotomy in errors, noting that since learners' foremost desire is communication, not all errors carry the same weight of importance. Her dichotomy places more importance on global errors relative to local errors because the former alters the overall meaning, whereas the latter impacts only a single component. Expressly, global errors distort understanding of L2 meaning to the point of preventing it, either through misrepresentation or incomprehensibility. Local errors, on the other hand, are not debilitating to understanding because they are confined to a single tag within the clause. MAP Grammar's use of the syntagmatic sequence all but eliminates global errors and reassures learners their message will be understood which increases L2 confidence and a desire to practice the language.

In terms of error correction, MAP Grammar's processes accomplish a number of pedagogical goals. First, MAP metalanguage is simple and its explicit grammatical explanations provide functional direction making it easier for learners to understand which function in their output is not correct. Second, the focus on function means correcting errors is necessarily bound up with meaningful classroom content. MAP discussions of form never shift learners' attention away from content since learners must use it to explain their tagging decisions. Traditional FonF approaches to interpreting English grammar, whether implicitly or explicitly delivered, result in a separation of content and discussions of grammar.

| From content | Learner reformed output |
|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| Who Does What Where | Who Does What Where |
| Ex.6: <u>She spun the top around the table.</u> | Ex 2: <u>She moved the top in the table.</u> |

For example, in Ex. 6, by referencing the *Does* tag, lexical correction focuses on the source of the top's sustained motion around an axis compared to a simple change in location. By referencing the *Where* tag, explicit grammatical explanations of prepositional form highlight movement across a surface as opposed to being imbedded within something. In summary, these explicit grammatical explanations make it very clear how form, meaning and function are connected without directing a learners' attention away from content thereby making grammatical form easier to understand, remember and use correctly.

MAP Grammar in Japanese L2 Classrooms

As mentioned earlier, MAP Grammar was developed in Japan as a means to promote practical and fluent usage of the L2, specifically English. There are significant differences between Japanese and English which cause many Japanese L2 learners to struggle with creating fluent L2 output. For example, Japanese syntax is very different from English, with Japanese subject use being flexible compared to the fixed sequenced order of English (Tanaka, 2016). Location and time are also conveyed differently in Japanese, location is achieved by using a specific place reference coupled with a particle, while a combination of a specific time reference and verb tense indicates time in Japanese, both of which make preposition use problematic (Shimada & Nagano, 2017). Finally, unlike English verb conjugation, Japanese verbs do not change for person or number (Narahara, 2002). MAP Grammar has been successful at addressing all of the above issues.

Since 2011, Saga Prefectural junior high schools have been using MAP Grammar instruction for the first 15 minutes of each grade-seven English class (Jojima, Oyabu, & Jinnouchi, 2018). At the time of its introduction, junior high schools in the prefecture were ranked below the national average for students' writing ability with students translating their Japanese sentences to write in English. Within three years of

MAP Grammar's introduction, Saga improved its ranking to well above the national average in not just writing but also in listening, speaking, and reading.

Second language acquisition research in Japan has also shown MAP Grammar helps learners understand and analyze complex grammatical structures more easily. Learners improve their error-free production of different forms by breaking the language down into functions (Hosogoshi, Hidaka, & Pearce, 2018; Kurihara, Kawanishi, & Sakamoto, 2018). Additionally, the sequence order of MAP tags helps learners increase the speed at which they can create output and with an increase in fluent use learners experience an increase in both peer discussions of content and motivation to learn the L2 (Smithers, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, MAP Grammar improves grammatically correct L2 output by aligning grammatical form, semantic function, and classroom content, creating multiple means for learners to cross-check their output. It promotes fluent L2 use by streamlining the process of creating L2 output through the systemization of English's syntagmatic sequence, and the scaffolding effect that this brings about. MAP Grammar helps learners to understand how the processes of grammatical form can be exploited to achieve meaningful L2 communication.

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