



## **Revisiting Grammar Translation: Students' Beliefs about Current Classroom Practices at Japanese Universities**

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### **Introduction**

There has been a growing role of English as a global language. In the last 50 years, many English language policies have been implemented in order to improve English language teaching all over the world. In East Asian countries, governments believe in the importance of fostering people who can communicate efficiently in English in order to compete in globalization (e.g., Ho, 2002; Littlewood, 2007). Governments have answered this necessity by making changes to the curriculum, so as to include more communication in language teaching. The Japanese government attempts to focus public language education on communication, shifting from more traditional grammar translation through their reform plan (MEXT, 2014). Many of those countries have been unsuccessful in implementing the changes in their English classes (Littlewood, 2007). The government perceives using traditional grammar translation as a problem to successful language learning in the English language classroom (MEXT, 2011). Despite the increasing discussion on discouraging the use of grammar translation, relatively few researchers have addressed learners' perspectives on this issue. If there is any discrepancy between learners' perspectives regarding grammar translation and classroom practices moving away from it, this may affect their English learning. Thus, this study examines how learners perceive grammar translation in the English language classroom. It investigates if proficiency is one of the factors potentially affecting their beliefs, in terms of the use of grammar translation in the classroom, by distributing a questionnaire to 260 Japanese university students and conducting five group interviews.

### **Literature Review**

#### **The Characteristics of Grammar Translation**

The traditional method focused on translation of reading materials, to facilitate an accurate and detailed understanding of the contents. The method had been popular from the 1840s to the 1940s and had been rejected due to an increasing demand for oral proficiency. Nevertheless, the method is still practised today, especially in courses where reading and translation are key skills to develop in preparation for an examination (Benati, 2018). English instruction through grammar translation has been conducted mainly at secondary and tertiary levels in Japan. Especially at secondary level, the method mainly emphasises

reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary for university entrance examinations (e.g., Butler, 2011; Sammy & Kobayashi, 2004). In the teacher-centred classes, the medium of instruction has been Japanese, and students vocalize English only when they practise reading, by repeating after the teachers.

## **Beliefs about Language Learning and Classroom Practices**

A number of research studies have been completed concerning learners' beliefs about learning and teaching English as a Second/Foreign language, or other foreign languages. The beliefs about language learning are commonly defined as "general assumptions that students hold about themselves as learners, about factors influencing language learning, and about the nature of learning and teaching" (Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 224). Learners' beliefs are important, since beliefs contribute to attitudes that are linked to behaviours (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993). The relationships between learners' beliefs and potential factors affecting the beliefs, such as proficiency, have not been explored thoroughly due to the lack of rigorous quantitative and qualitative analyses as described in the following.

## **Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) Studies and Grammar Translation**

According to previous studies of language learning beliefs, Horwitz's Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) (1988) has been used in several studies. The BALLI, consisting of 27 five-point Likert-scale items, has been used for investigating beliefs about language learning, based on themes identified by teachers. Using the BALLI, Horwitz (1988) conducted a study of U.S. university foreign language students. The results indicated that many beliefs held by a majority of learners revealed assumptions relying too much on grammar translation, such as an anxiety about correctness, a dependency on translation, and an unwillingness to guess, potentially leading to a lack of student confidence in the classroom focusing on communication.

Numerous research studies administering the BALLI were conducted not only in the USA but also in other countries, especially EFL settings such as Japan, Korea and Taiwan (e.g., Keim, Furuya, Doye, & Carlson, 1996). A substantial number of EFL students disagreed with items associated with grammar translation. Horwitz (1999) concluded that students might have perceived their previous learning experiences as unsuccessful, and they sought different contents and approaches for their English learning. Despite its popularity, the BALLI has been criticised (Kuntz, 1996) because it lacks statistical evidence and qualitative data in order to investigate in depth learners' beliefs.

## **Japanese University Students' Belief Studies Regarding Grammar Translation**

Besides Keim et al. (1996), some other studies have investigated Japanese university students' beliefs about English language learning in the classroom. Donnell (2003) examined 135 university students using questionnaires that included the BALLI. The students showed negative views on learning grammar, while they believed translations were important. Similarly, Matsuura, Chiba, and Hilderbrandt (2001) investigated 301 students in Japanese universities by using a self-constructed questionnaire. The results revealed their belief that speaking and listening were more important than reading, writing, and grammar. Students indicated that correct pronunciation was important. Although students believed that they should not focus solely on grammar, they thought using translation was essential for comprehension. Most recently, Gamble, Aliponga, Koshiyama, Wilkins, Yoshida, and Ando (2013) investigated 67 Japanese university students using a questionnaire and concluded that the students were less responsive to grammar translation.

Those studies showed that Japanese university students tended to have a negative view about grammar teaching, but were in favour of translation in the classroom. Nevertheless, similar to the BALLI studies, most of the studies displayed the extent of agreement between the statements on the questionnaire using

predefined categories. Instead of using categories determined in advance, an exploratory factor analysis should be incorporated, in order to check the underlying structure of the beliefs and to explore if there are any potential factors affecting the beliefs, such as proficiency. Qualitative investigations are also required in order to articulate Japanese university students' beliefs.

Based on the literature review, the main focus of this paper was to investigate beliefs of Japanese university students, with the focus on the use of grammar translation in the classroom, and to examine if there is any difference in their beliefs between two different proficiency groups by using mixed methods. This was a part of a study that investigated Japanese university students' beliefs about English language learning and teaching in the classroom.

## Methodology

This study employed a mixture of different methods. A questionnaire survey of students was conducted and facilitated by follow-up interviews.

### Questionnaire

The instrument designed for this study was based on the questionnaire used in Matsuura et al.'s (2001) study for two reasons: (1) The instruments were administered in Japanese university settings, and (2) the items focused more on classroom instruction. Each statement was written in Japanese followed by a 6-point semantic differential scale. The pilot study was conducted with 46 Japanese university students from different universities, in order to ensure that all respondents would correctly understand each statement by asking them directly. To investigate the extent to which the study participants favoured different classroom instructions, the questionnaires included items related to grammar translation and communication in the classroom (Matsuura et al., 2001).

The questionnaire described above was completed by 260 students from three different universities. They were selected because the researcher was familiar with the teachers of these students and their teaching methods, having observed their classes. The students were allocated to their present English classes according to their proficiency levels. They had been exposed to English in a Japanese context that included grammar translation at high schools in Japan. Detailed information about the participants is presented in Table 1 on the next page. The quantitative data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA), Cronbach's alpha, descriptive statistics, t-test, and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used.

### Interviews

In order to examine the beliefs from a qualitative perspective, semi-structured group interviews were conducted in Japanese and the questions were based on the results of factor analysis. The questions related to grammar translation included "Do you think translation is useful or not useful in the classroom?" "What is your view of learning grammar in the classroom?" Attending the interview sessions that were implemented by the researcher were the following: Four (male) students from university A (one interview session), nine (four male and five female) students from university B (two interview sessions with groups of four and five students for each), and eight (six male and two female) students from university C (two interview sessions with groups of four students for each). Owing to the students' time constraints, it was difficult to interview them individually; and some of the interview groups included students from different classes taught by different teachers but from the same university. The qualitative data were analysed by employing the methodology of qualitative content analysis (e.g., Mayring, 2000). The data was coded via a number of passes through the data, to generate themes, to do general coding, to code in depth, and finally to check coding. The analysis involved constructing a thematic framework by

identifying key issues, concepts, and themes. The final stage included interpretations of the coded data. All participants took part in this study on a voluntary basis.

TABLE 1  
*The Background Information of the Participants*

University	Number (English language classes)	Sex	Year	Major	Proficiency
A: A public university in Hokuriku	31 (90 min academic listening and reading; English/Japanese-medium instruction)	male (100%)	first year (100%)	Engineering	CFER A1
B: A private university in Hokuriku	103 (45 min communication skills; English-medium instruction)	male (39%) female (61%)	first year (82%) second year (18%)	International studies	CFER A2
C: A private university in Kanto	126 (90 min TOEIC reading and listening; Japanese-medium instruction)	male (72%) female (28%)	first year (42%) second year (58%)	Information studies	CFER A2

## Results

### Questionnaire Data Relevant to Grammar Translation

#### Learners' beliefs

An EFA was conducted to check whether the belief factors would emerge from the questionnaire data. An EFA using the principal axis factoring was conducted on the 35 items with oblique rotation (promax). The four factors that included 18 of the 35 designed questionnaire items were retained in the final analysis. Table 2 on the next page lists these four factors, the items which loaded on each factor, and Cronbach's alpha. This paper focuses on Factor 3: Beliefs about grammar translation.

The items associated with grammar translation were loaded on Factor 3 such as four items (6, 16, 21, 28): teacher-centred instructions, the effectiveness of translations, and focusing on accuracy in class, and the importance of grammar for communication. The other two items (8, 22) concerned skills taught in the classroom: teaching reading and writing. Items 6, 16, 21, 22, and 28 with means of 3.20 ( $SD = 1.10$ ), 3.88 ( $SD = 1.09$ ), 3.63 ( $SD = 1.26$ ), 3.80 ( $SD = 1.04$ ), and 3.97 ( $SD = 1.23$ ) respectively, might have reflected the relatively positive view of the use of grammar translation in the classroom. The remaining item dealt with using materials in the classrooms for self-directed learning (Item 15). The item was referred to when reviewing the grammar books used in their high schools and it was rated negatively with means of less than 2.77 ( $SD = 1.24$ ).

#### Learners' beliefs and their proficiency

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare the beliefs about grammar translation in higher proficiency groups (CEFR A2, students from university B and C) and lower proficiency groups (CEFR A1, students from university A). There was no significant mean difference in the factor scores for higher proficiency ( $M = -0.39$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ,  $CI = -0.30, 0.23$ ) and lower proficiency ( $M = 0.01$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ,  $CI = -0.11, 0.12$ ) groups ( $t(246) = -0.26$ ,  $p = .80$ ).

TABLE 2

*Four-factor Solution for English Language Learning and Teaching Beliefs of Japanese Students*

Items	Factor loadings			
	1	2	3	4
<i>Factor 1: Instructional styles (<math>\alpha = .87</math>)</i>				
33. Paired activities are more effective than individual work to improve my English proficiency.	.875			
07. Paired activities are productive uses of language class time.	.867			
18. Working in a group is a productive use of language class time.	.856			
02. Working in a group is more effective than individual work to improve my English proficiency.	.656			
<i>Factor 2: Goals and objectives (<math>\alpha = .76</math>)</i>				
31. If I learn to speak English very well, it will help me get a good job.		.820		
35. I want to be able to use English like a native speaker.		.812		
14. Native-like pronunciation is important for communication.		.734		
17. Positive participation is necessary to improve my English		.368		
<i>Factor 3: Grammar translation (<math>\alpha = .67</math>)</i>				
08. Teachers should put emphasis on writing in class.			.835	
22. Teachers should put emphasis on reading in class.			.528	
16. It is effective to translate English sentences into Japanese for learning English in class.			.499	
15. I study English on my own by using teaching materials such as textbooks.			.468	
28. Grammar is important for communication.			.457	
06. Listening to a lecture is an effective way of learning English for me.			.394	
21. I want my teacher to correct all my mistakes.			.342	
<i>Factor 4: Communication (<math>\alpha = .72</math>)</i>				
30. I want to interact with my teacher in English.				.743
27. I want to use English as much as possible in class.				.623
32. In English classes, I prefer to have my teacher provide explanations in Japanese. <sup>b</sup>				.528

Note. a. Only loadings of  $\pm 0.33$  or greater are included in this solution. b. The item was reverse-coded.

However, belief differences were found in terms of university/class types. A one-way between groups ANOVA was performed to explore the mean differences of the factor scores between the university/class types. Participants were divided into three groups upon their university/class types (university A, B and C). Statistically significant differences at the  $p < .001$  level were found in the mean scores ( $F(2, 245) = 24.60, \eta^2 = .17$ ). Post-hoc comparisons using the Scheffé test indicated that the mean score of the beliefs about grammar translation for students from university B ( $M = 0.43, SD = 0.80, CI = 0.27, 0.60$ ) were significantly different from those of the students from university A ( $M = -0.04, SD = 0.70, CI = -0.30, 0.23$ ) at the  $p < .05$  level ( $p = .02$ ) and university C ( $M = -0.32, SD = 0.81, CI = -0.47, -0.18$ ) at the  $p < .001$  level. The beliefs of the students from universities A and C were not significantly different from one another ( $p = .19$ ). Thus, students from university B focusing strictly on communication, using only English as a medium of instruction, had a significantly more positive view towards grammar translation than students from universities A and C, focusing on academic and TOEIC listening and reading using mainly Japanese as a medium of instruction.

### Interview Data Relevant to Grammar Translation

This section focuses on the themes related to grammar translation: Beliefs about learning grammar and translation.

### **Beliefs about learning grammar**

Some students mentioned that grammar played a very important role in communication. The other students insisted that they did not see any rationale for learning grammar for communication. This difference seemed to depend upon the types of communication to which they referred. As a student from university A mentioned, "If you are at a work place, you may need to have some knowledge of grammar to have an important conversation. But in an informal setting, I do not think you need to know much grammar." Most of the students agreed that English language teaching in secondary education had helped them gain reasonable grammatical knowledge and they preferred not to have extensive grammar teaching in the university classroom.

### **Beliefs about translation**

The interview revealed that some students mentioned the necessity of translation, due to a lack in their English proficiency. A student from university C said, "I think it would be better if we could understand English without translation. But I cannot do it. So, even though I need to translate the English sentences into Japanese, as long as I can understand the English sentences, it is okay." Students from university B mentioned, "We wish teachers would use translation in order to make sure that we understand the textbook in class because we sometimes have no idea what we are learning. We just have to let it pass."

## **Discussion**

A strong agreement with grammar translation was revealed. The students thought grammar teaching might not be necessary for informal use at tertiary level because they had gained sufficient knowledge at secondary level. This may explain the participants in the previous studies (Donell, 2003; Matsuura et al., 2001) which showed negative views on grammar teaching in university classrooms. In this study the students' views toward grammar translation in the classroom did not differ between two different proficiency groups. This could be attributed to the fact that their English language proficiency had not reached a threshold where they could learn the language without using grammar translation. Nevertheless, their belief differed depending on the class they were enrolled in. Students from university B taking the classes which had a strong focus on communication in English most strongly agreed with the use of translation, because their English was inadequate for them to keep up with their class and they urgently needed translation. In the interviews, students from university B especially emphasised the importance of the use of translation in class. Thus, the discrepancy between beliefs of the students from university B about translation and classroom instructions contributed to their particularly strong positive beliefs about translation.

## **Conclusion**

Although the results should be interpreted with caution, particularly due to the limited sample and potential confounding variables, such as measurement of their proficiency and university/class differences, the present study confirmed that the learners tended to have positive views on grammar translation, mainly because of their standard of proficiency (CEFR A1, A2). A discrepancy between the beliefs and classroom practices and its potential negative effects was found.

Overall, the study underscores the importance of drawing attention to learners' proficiency and the potential effect of discrepancies between learners' beliefs and classroom practices. As Saito (2012) suggests, grammar translation can be a "trouble-shooting function" (p. 33) to make sure students comprehend the target text in class. The Japanese government needs to focus on how to make use of

grammar translation, especially for low proficiency students. The replacement of grammar translation is more likely to lead only to strengthening the students' preference towards it. Therefore, the study calls for more investigation into the impact of proficiency on beliefs, which includes students with higher English proficiency, so as to incorporate grammar translation and other teaching approaches most effectively.

### The Author

Natsuno Funada is a DPhil candidate in the Department of Education, University of Oxford, United Kingdom. Her research interests have focused on beliefs regarding English language learning and teaching and attitudes towards English as a global language.

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