Does Teaching Grammar Really Hinder Students' Speaking Abilities?

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In the history of formal English education in Japan, grammar used to be the mainstream. In the secondary education system, teachers used to spend many hours teaching grammar to the students. However, it has been replaced by the aural/oral method of teaching a foreign language. There was even a remark that teaching grammar hinders students from communicating fluently. Literally, there was a time when grammar was set aside in formal English education. However, the author noticed that in grammar classes, the students speak English more loudly and confidently without much hesitation than in other types of English classes. One of the reasons is that they are not worried about the contents of the speeches. They are simply concentrating on the forms. They are not afraid of making major mistakes, and the errors they make are minor so they do not feel embarrassed in public. The atmosphere of the grammar classes is very positive and the students enjoy speaking English. In this paper, the author shows how grammar classes can contribute to the acquisition of the students' speaking abilities and manners. "Learning grammar was a precious experience", one student reported after the course.

Keywords: grammar, form-oriented, speaking abilities, practice, acquisition, communication, automatization, skills

Introduction

In Japan where English is taught as a foreign language, the status of English grammar has been changing according to the language education policy provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology. English grammar used to be the central part of English education, especially at the beginning of the stage where the students first started studying at junior high school and high school. However, this trend has changed due to the introduction of aural/oral approach of language learning. The position of grammar has been shifted aside and the aural/oral approach for English education took the place for it. Now, one of the main goals for studying English is to be able to speak the language. Therefore, listening and speaking practices are emphasized a lot all through the formal English education. It is often said that Japanese students cannot speak English well because grammar has been stressed too much. Is this really the case? In the author's opinion, if there is a tendency that Japanese students are reluctant to speak English in public, the reason is not because of teaching or learning grammar. Knowing grammar certainly increases students' general knowledge of English and gives confidence to them. Knowledge and performance are two different aspects of a language and it is important to lead students to the phase where they can actually use their grammatical knowledge in real communication. Grammar is the core of the language just like the bones to our bodies. Although learning

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grammar is a strenuous job and requires time and patience, grammar supports other aspects of language learning, such as vocabulary, reading, writing, listening and speaking as well. The author thinks that grammar is and should be one key element of English education. But the question is how it should be taught. For some people, grammar means some kind of dissecting process of a language using difficult terminology. This misconception about grammar should be eliminated. Grammar is the foundation of English learning and without the solid foundation, all other processes of learning will become fragile. The author strongly emphasizes the necessity of giving regular basic grammar practice to robust students' English abilities.

Review of Related Literature

Automatization of Grammatical Skills

This study is purely based on the practice that this author experienced in her English classes for non-majors. The students' English proficiency level is either pre-intermediate or intermediate level. Most of the students still need the teacher's instructions on grammar in class. Through various grammar exercises, the students have opportunities to pronounce words properly and create new sentences with the written instructions of the problems of the textbook. In order to solve the problems, certain cognition skills are required, such as recognitions for ☐ marks as negative sentences or for ☐ marks as inquiries. These are very basic grammatical changes they need to make based on the acquired rules. This grammar exercise will transfer the students from the level of the acquisition of declarative knowledge to automatization as is stated by Dekeyser and Criado (2012) in their article:

> While different characteristics of automaticity have been stressed by different researchers…, there is general agreement that the more automatized knowledge, the less attention it requires and the less error-prone it is. Automaticity is now usually seen as the somewhat idealized end point of the process of automatization. Even highly automatized activities still require some degree of attention and can still interfere with (or be interfered with by) other activities, as driving accidents or arithmetic errors show. (p. 325)

The same notion of automaticity is explained by Segalowitz (2003) as follows:

> As will become clear in a moment, the term automatic has a number of different technical meanings. Nevertheless, psychologists generally use the term in a sense similar to what is meant in ordinary language when we say, for example, that an automatic shift car changes gears without deliberate intervention by the driver, in contrast to a standard shift car which requires the driver to perform a manual operation. …Such a transition from non-automatic to automatic performance seems to be a part of nearly all skill acquisition. In language learning, increased performance efficiency can be seen as contributing to fluency, that is, the ability to use language rapidly, smoothly, and accurately. (p. 383)

At the beginning, the speed might be slow and it takes time for sentence production. However, the process will speed up and gradually reaches the level of automatization, which means that the learners' process is autonomous and unconscious. Borrowing a sentence written by Bloomfield (1945, p. 16), "Practice everything until it becomes second nature". According to the American structuralists' theory, learners should practice every language grammatical feature until it becomes habitual. What this author has been trying to state in this paper seems to be very close to the theory of American structuralists. In the process of habit formation, many cognitive activities take place, such as replacement of the subject with a third singular male or female personal pronoun. Therefore, the students are not merely reading the sentences or phrases aloud, but they are actively involved in creation of new sentences. During the processes, they often make mistakes. However, those

mistakes are trifle so it is nothing embarrassing for the students, since making mistakes and being corrected in class are often embarrassing and those things can damage the students' willingness to speak up in public. The grammatical exercises do not impose a heavy burden on the student, so he/she feels that he/she does not have to utter a perfect English sentence. The students can produce new sentences and utter them in a relaxed manner. They are not worried about the contents or the meanings of the speech so much and just concentrate on the forms and the use of proper cognition skills. This explanation seems to be contradictory to the idea that the purpose of teaching/learning a language is to express some meaningful contents to the listener. However, the students of the basic or pre-intermediate level might benefit more from the sentence production activities without paying too much attention to the contents of the speech.

Transitional Progress From Form-Based to Content-Based Language Learning

The main goal of language learning is to create new sentences for conveying a message and communicating with other people in a natural setting. In order to achieve these goals, the acquisition of grammar plays a vital role. Understanding systematic rules will lead the learner to the final phase of creating new sentences without much attention. This author thinks that structuralists' theory of language acquisition is not something which is against generative grammar. These two mainstreams of linguistic theories are often depicted as bi polars rather than two components which comprise of the whole landscape of language acquisition. However, this author thinks that the students make a transitional progress from form-based practice to meaning- or content- based production. Even if a language system is innate as generative grammarians say, people still need to practice so they can use the system on the surface level.

The students' language abilities develop from a very careful form-oriented practice to production of sentences in contextualized situations. Transmission from form-based practice to creation of sentences in a meaningful context which includes discussion, expressions of own opinions, agreements, and conveyance of messages so forth, should be smooth and takes place slowly. If this transitional change occurs abruptly, the students are likely to fail in making comprehensible utterances by utilizing proper grammatical knowledge and the communication might break down. This kind of failure can leave a mental damage to the students, which teachers should try best to avoid the risk of.

Background of the Study

Features of Grammar Exercises

In the grammar courses that this author teaches, the students often talk faster and louder and more confidently compared to the performance in the four-skill type of English classes. The reason for this is because the students are not worried about the contents of their speeches so much. By utilizing the vocabulary and the rules, they spontaneously produce short sentences or questions. Their products are often not context-based ones. They are simply mechanical drills. The students make mistakes, but those mistakes are nothing serious, so they do not feel embarrassed when the errors are pointed out in class. The grammatical items to be taught are very basic ones and the acquisition of those grammatical items is required to carry out daily conversation or to write with accuracy and fluency. All the activities are focused on grammar, but basic writing and speaking activities are also involved in the process of the acquisition of certain grammatical items. These simple grammar exercises enhance the students' speaking abilities and communication skills. In the mechanical drills (see Figure 1), the students are expected to make simple sentences or questions. Some parts can be replaced with

other words for communicative purposes in the real life. Therefore, applicability of basic sentences for grammar exercises to the real life is very high.
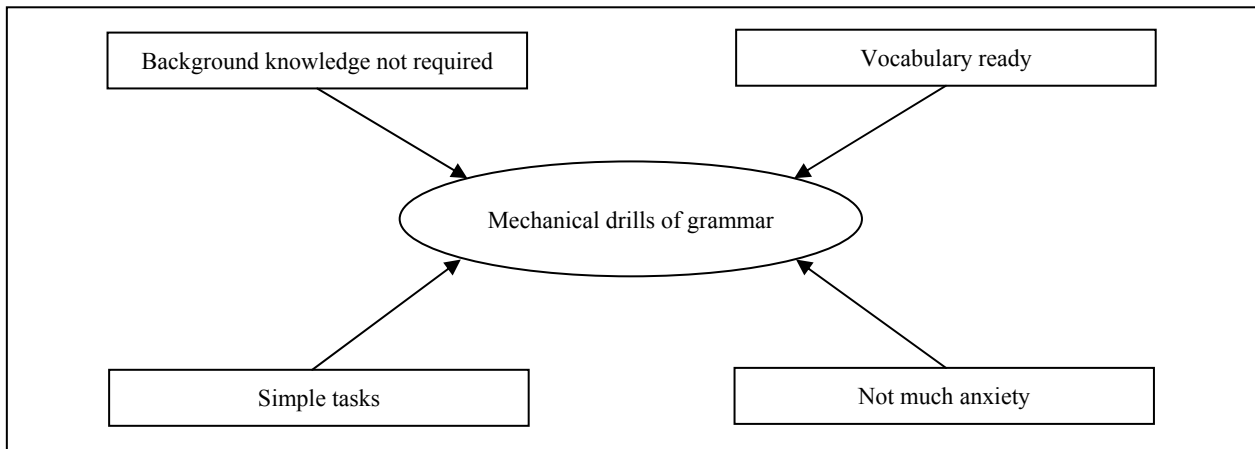

Figure 1. Diagram of mechanical drills for grammar.

Features of Content-Based English Classes

On the other hand, the same topic which the students talk about for content-based speeches has few chances to be discussed again in the real life outside the classroom. The sentences which are produced in the topic-based conversations will not be used repeatedly. In order to talk about a specific topic, the students need to study about the topic by reading and listening to related materials in advance. They also have to study the important vocabulary which is related to the topic. When the time of utterances comes, they often have worries and anxieties about making mistakes (see Figure 2). For content-based speaking exercises, enough grammar exercises are not provided for the students who are still at the basic level in order to discuss the matter. Therefore, if the students stumble in making sentences, those mistakes are often critical so it is likely the conversation or speeches fail there. On the other hand, with grammar exercises, since a specific grammatical point is clarified and explained in the text or by the teacher, they do not fail in making themselves understood. Even if they fail, the mistakes are trifle. Step-by-step approaches for improving the student's speaking abilities are necessary for scaffolding them.
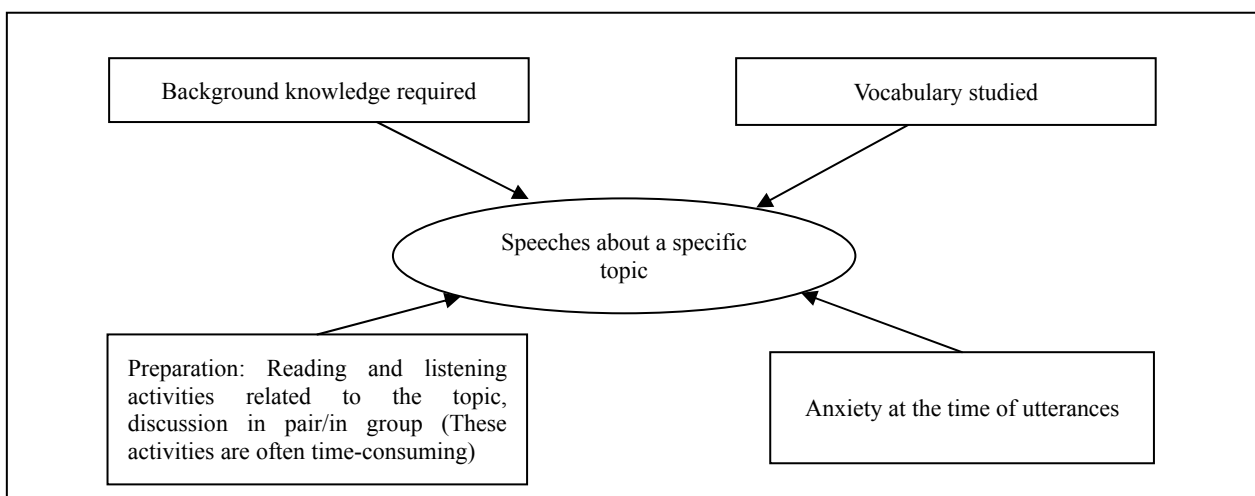

Figure 2. Diagram of content-based speeches.

Studies

Study With an Intensive Grammar Course

Based on the previous background of the research, this author examined the time spent on the students' utterances in grammar classes at two Japanese universities using a stopwatch. The first study was conducted in the grammar class which was one of the selective courses. The number of the students was 20 including both male and female students. In the first grammar class, English grammar was intensively studied for 90 minutes every week for 16 weeks. They were mostly freshmen. They used *Oxford English Grammar Course Basic* as the textbook. The purpose of the course was to provide them a class where they can learn basic grammatical knowledge and have opportunities to utilize those skills in actual communicative circumstances. They were expected to write answers in advance, because writing is considered to be part of silent sentence production process, which is a very critical phase for the actual utterances. The students were assigned to utter the newly created sentences in class in turn. The mistakes made by them were not corrected right away. Instead, the teacher pointed them out after the student finished uttering a group of sentences. The way of making corrections was very careful and this author tried to be thoughtful as well so the students would not feel embarrassed in front of their peers. The corrections were often followed by some encouraging remarks.

Study With a Writing Class

In the second grammar class, English grammar was taught for about 30 minutes in 90-minute writing class every week for 15 weeks. *Oxford Living Grammar Pre-intermediate Level* was used as a textbook. The purpose of teaching grammar was to enable the students to use basic grammar skills for writing English sentences. In both classes, this author timed the minutes when the students spoke English using a time watch.

Most of the students had studied English grammar at high schools. However, they studied English grammar in various different ways. It was quite common that they studied English grammar with Japanese explanation by the teacher, according to the students' remarks. This means that they may not have had enough opportunities to practice using a certain grammatical item they studied.

The main difference between the first study and the second study was that in the second study, the students wrote answers in the textbook as part of preparation before each class at home. Therefore, all of the 30 minutes which was one thirds of the class period was spent on oral grammar exercises and did not include any writing tasks. In the first study, in contrast, the total of the sentence production time in class consisted of two parts; one was the students' oral production and the other was their silent sentence production in writing. The writing tasks the students engaged in in the second class were completely different from the grammar exercises. They used another textbook which was especially designed for improving writing skills. In other words, there were no direct relations between the grammar exercises and writing exercises.

Results

The Result of Study 1

Tables 1 and 2 and Figure 3 show the result of the percentage of the students' utterances for grammar exercises.

As is clear from Table 1 and Figure 3, about half of the class period was spent on both speaking and writing for each section of the textbook. The process of writing took longer than the process of speaking did. This implies that the students created new sentences and wrote them silently as a pre-task using their various cognitive skills. This process required a careful thought to make a correct English sentence. They did not use an

eraser to correct their own mistakes, because it might have slowed down the writing process. Instead, they crossed them out and wrote new phrases or sentences above or below the original ones. They used either a pencil or a mechanical pencil. This writing pre-task was as important as the actual speaking task following that. For the speaking task, the students needed to pay attention to the phonological and articulatory aspects of English. However, in the process of writing, they were mostly concentrated on the grammatical aspects of the language. There were some students who were confident enough to skip the process of writing and were ready to utter the newly created sentences right away. However, most students were still reluctant to participate in the process of oral sentence production without the pre-task.

The Result of Study 2

In the second study, as Table 2 shows, a large portion of each class period was occupied by the students' utterances. Since any writing process as a pre-task was not involved in it, the students' speaking process for delivering new sentences progressed very smoothly and fast. This did not include the time of corrections and restatements to produce correct sentences. On average, about 40%-50% of the total of 30 minutes for grammar exercises was dominated by the students. Therefore, the classes where the second study was conducted gave more impressions that they were always talking for the 30 minutes. Again, the manner of the speeches showed confidence and certain enjoyments as well. This is one of the features which are unique to grammar classes this author teaches and this cannot be seen so often in other types of English classes. This second study was conducted at a Japanese private college in Tokyo where this author teaches once a week.

Table 1

The Time of the Students' Utterances in the First Grammar Class

	Oxford English Grammar Course Basic	Time for the students' oral production	Time for writing preparation	Total
Section 4	Past Tenses (pp. 51-53)	18 minutes (20%)	Approximately 30 minutes	48 minutes (53%)
Section 5	Perfect Tenses (pp. 64-69)*	16 minutes and 30 seconds (18.3%)	30 minutes	46 minutes and 30 seconds (51.6%)
Section 6 ①	Modal Verbs (pp. 76-79)	18 minutes and 15 seconds (20%)	30 minutes	48 minutes and 15 seconds (53.6%)
Section 6 ②	Modal Verbs (pp. 81-83) (pp. 87-89)	16 minutes and 30 seconds (18.3%)	30 minutes	46 minutes and 30 seconds (51.7%)
Section 7	Passives (pp. 94-99)	33 minutes and 20 seconds (37%)	30 minutes	60 minutes and 20 seconds (67%)
Section 8	Questions and Negatives (pp. 108-111) (pp. 114-115)	15 minutes and 11 seconds (16.8%)	30 minutes	45 minutes and 11 seconds (50.2%)

Notes. The on-set date of this study was October 31, 2014 and ended on December 19, 2014. Each class had 90 minutes.
* The questions on the pages 58-63 of Section 5 were timed incorrectly by mismanupulation of the stopwatch. Therefore, the data are not written in the table.

Table 2

The Time of the Students' Utterances for Grammar Exercises in the Second Grammar Class

Oxford Living Grammar Pre-intermediate	Time for the students' oral production	Time for writing answers as preparation
Lesson 10: Modal Verbs ① (pp. 38-41)	15 minutes (50%)	Homework
Lesson 11: Modal Verbs ② (pp. 42-45)	15 minutes and 30 seconds (52%)	Homework

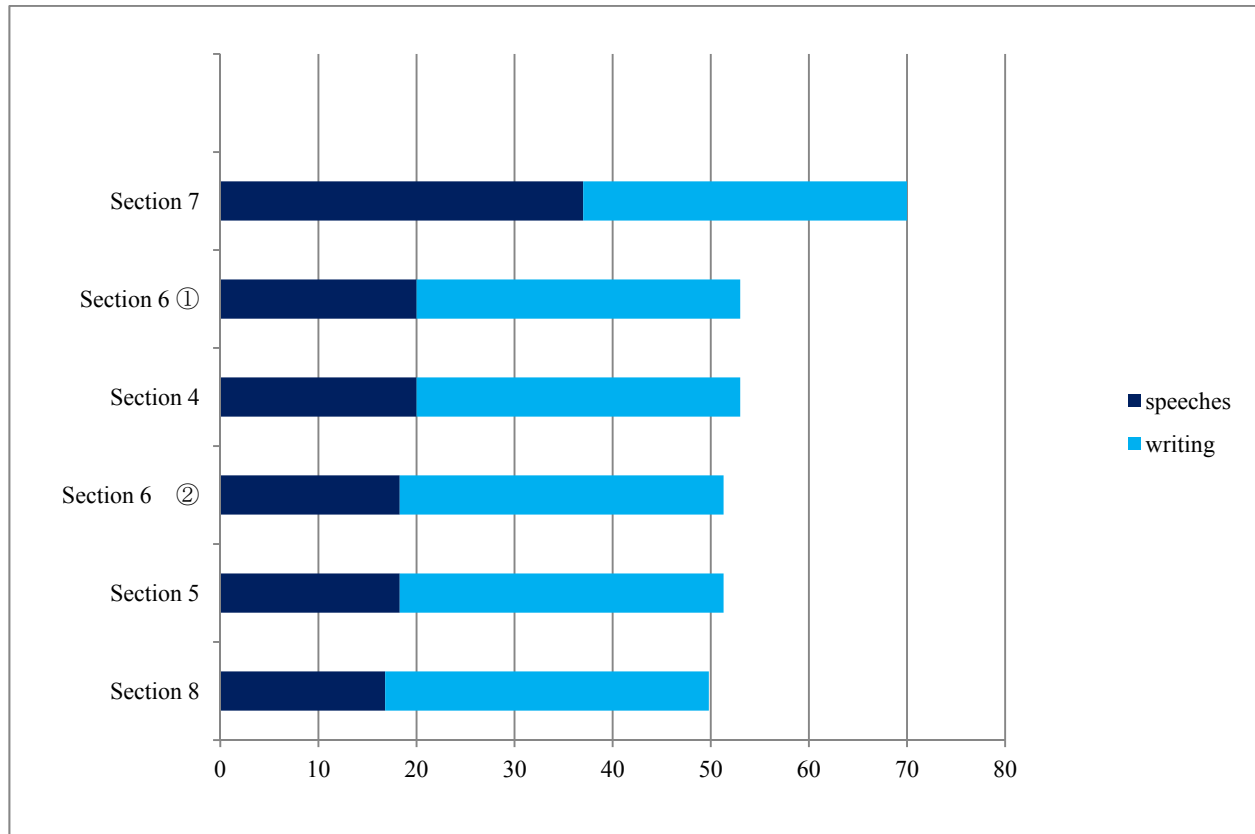*Note.* Thirty minutes out of 90 minutes was spent on grammar exercises.

Figure 3. Percentage of the students' utterances and writing in the first grammar class.

Discussion and Conclusion

The percentage of students' utterances in both grammar classes is high compared to the four-skill type of English classes where a lot of other tasks are involved, such as reading, listening, and vocabulary practice. Besides, in the latter type of classes, much time is spent on the teacher's instructions or explanations. In other words, the classes are often teacher-centered rather than student-centered. Therefore, the percentage of the students' speaking time is relatively small. The features of the classes are quite different and the purposes are different as well. However, from the point of view of improving students' basic speaking abilities, it is highly recommended to make use of simple grammar exercises to build confidence to speak in public. The students are not passively repeating after the teacher, but they are actively involved in the speaking activities by producing new sentences. Another reason for recommending grammar exercises is the students have opportunities to develop their motor movements for articulation.

From the linguistic point of view, the distance between Japanese and English is very far (Japanese language has the structure of Subject + Object + Verb. On the other hand, English has the structure of Subject + Verb + Object). The cultural distance between the Japanese-speaking society and English-speaking societies is even farther (see Figure 4) compared to the distance between English-speaking societies and European language speaking societies (see Figure 5).
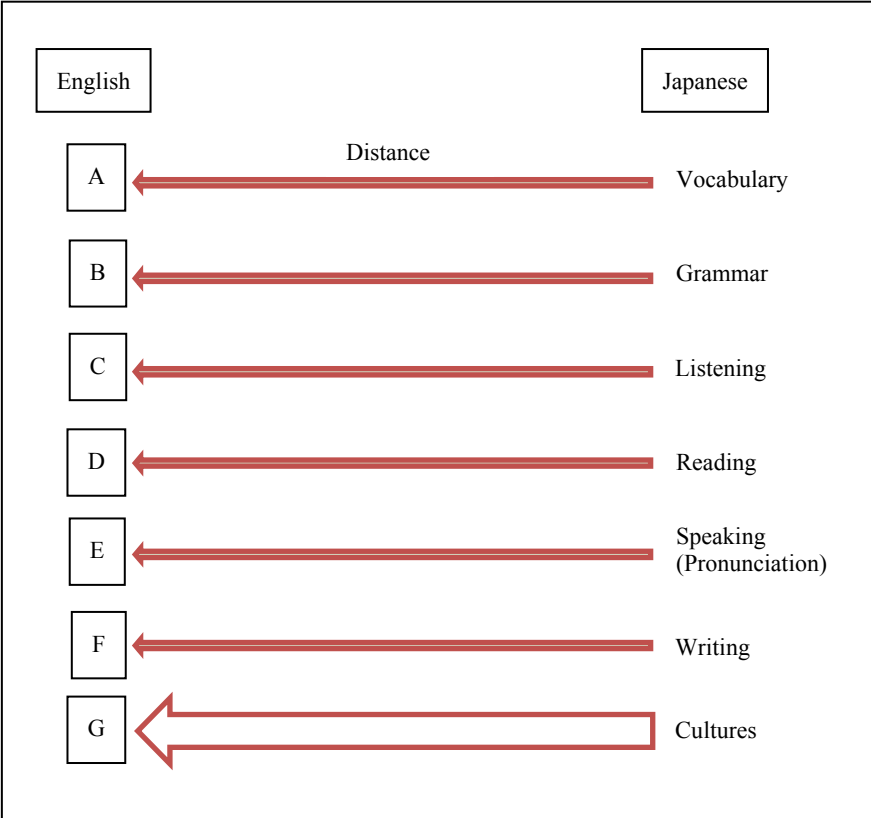
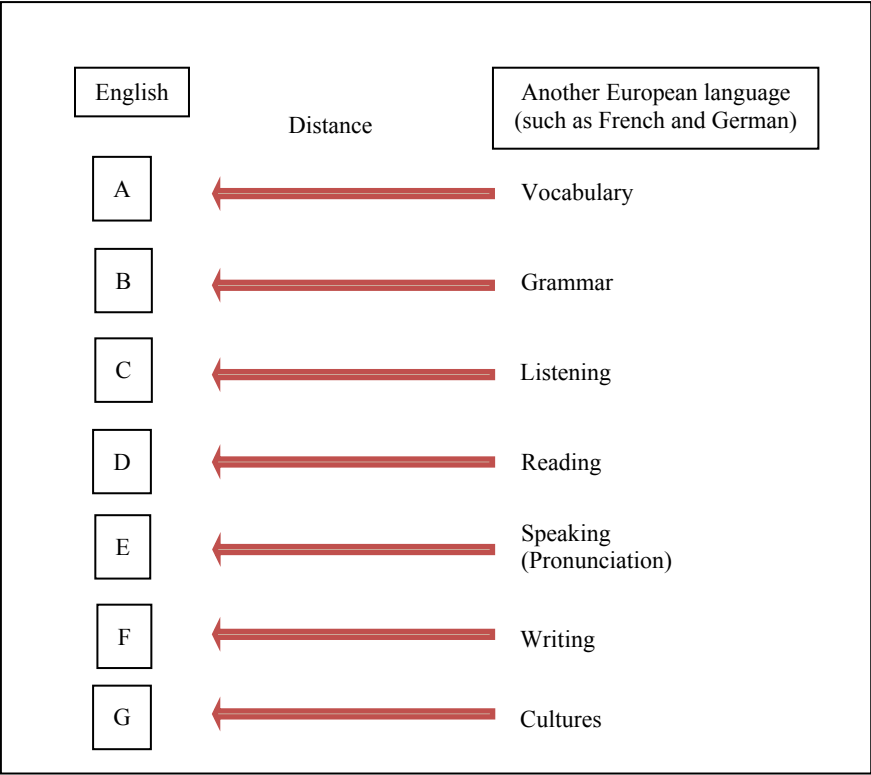Figure 4. Distances between English and Japanese.

Figure 5. Distances between English and a European language.

In Japan, silence and modesty are still valued and it is difficult for the students to overcome the cultural barrier. Communication in a foreign language is often destructed or fails not because of English abilities but because of mental or cultural barriers. Looking at the results of the two studies, a large amount of the class period is spent on the students' oral production. Their manner of speech is very different from the one this author sees in the other types of English classes. They talk very loudly and confidently, which is encouraging for both the students and the teacher. This kind of positive manner can be transferred to their real life conversations in the future. When a new curriculum is designed for the students who study English as a minor course, English classes are often designed for developing all four skills and they are not necessarily designed for developing a certain skill of the language, such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Instead, all four skills are combined together and the students are expected to develop every skill during the course. This sounds very simple and efficient. However, one disadvantage is that this type of English classes does not focus on one/any aspect of the language learning to improve its skills. The author strongly suggests that any curriculum should include a grammar course in the English language education. Grammar is a key element and should be included in the curriculum at a formal Japanese educational institution not only to acquire a set of rules, but to improve the students' speaking abilities as well. The students will have plenty of opportunities for reading and listening to English in the real life if they seriously want to. However, if the students miss the opportunity to study the very important set of rules of the whole system when at a university, then it is likely that they may not be able to study it forever. The results of the two studies in this research showed that the students were actively involved and participated in the process of speaking. The manner of the speeches was very positive. Grammar is not something to be set aside from the mainstream of English education, the author believes that it is something which other aspects of language education should center around.

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