Teaching Japanese students to express future time in English

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Introduction

In teaching Japanese students to express concepts involving future time in English, I have repeatedly run into the same problems over and over. I would like to share in this paper some of the observations that I have made concerning these special difficulties that Japanese students face, and also present some strategies that I have found to be useful in helping students to achieve basic visual mapping of this territory. I would like to focus especially on understanding time assumptions in both Japanese and English verb forms, and to offer some strategies in helping students deal with the differences. I would also like to present a grid that I have found useful in helping students bring it all together. This grid shows the grammatical constructions most likely to be used by native speakers to express future time in specific types of situations.

Japanese students encounter some specific problems when expressing future time in English. In this paper, I shall approach those problems with the belief that students encounter difficulties using the target language grammar at precisely those points in which time assumptions in verb tenses in the target language differ from those in their native grammar, and the greater the difference, the greater the difficulty. This paper will consider how assumptions about time inherent in the Japanese verb forms differ from the corresponding English constructions, and then see how we can use

those differences as an aid to understanding and resolving problems the students are having.

First, we shall have a look at what specific English grammatical constructions are used when we need to talk about future time. Also, we need to consider what types of linguistic negotiation we are involved in when we need to use each of these grammatical forms to express future time.

Probably the first, and maybe the only, future construction that most of my Japanese students are familiar with is the notion of expressing high probability or certainty - a predictive function. Students have learned to equate *will* with the future tense in English, and they almost invariably establish a one-to-one correspondence in their minds between *will* and the Japanese word Ital. Many students tend to believe that the "future tense" in English consists solely of *will* and that *will* corresponds to *daro*. Period. End of discussion. The first thing we need to do is help them unlearn this.

This *will = daro* correspondence does serve students well for reading newspaper and magazine articles - in other words, when dealing with written English - but problems quickly arise when the students attempt to transfer this assumption to spoken English, where they need to express such concepts as talking about offers, decisions. and promises far more than making predictions.

How to talk about future time in English

I would like to present four basic situations in English that I consider to be targets for student mastery involving the use of future time. After each situation, I will present a list of possible grammatical constructions used in that situation. The constructions are given in what I believe to be in order from the most common to the least common, and so the first item in each

list is the most important, on down to the last, which is the least important. The items at the top of each list in bold type are the ways I believe a native speaker would generally express these ideas, and so these are the learning targets, i.e., grammatical forms that I try to help the students to connect to that situation. Of course, these lists are not to be regarded as complete lists of all possibilities.

1. Expressing certainty, or very high probability

As noted above, probability is a common linguistic notion requiring the ability to express future time. This concept is used to project the future in a variety of situations, from what the weather *will* be like tomorrow to what *will* happen if interest rates go up.

While both *will* and *be going to* constructions are possible and both are used in spoken English, *will* tends to sound somewhat more formal (i.e., unusual) in spoken English, but tends to be the preferred written form. Since the only other use for *be going to* is to express something that has already been established, when a native speaker says "It's going to rain tomorrow," we will probably assume from the *be going to* construction that the speaker is reporting what he/she has heard on the news. On the other hand, "It will rain tomorrow" is more likely to be taken as a way of expressing one's own certainty that it *will* rain. This use of *will* can be traced to the human will, denoting willpower that is used to make a decision or to insist. It is helpful for students to make a connection between *will* and willpower. Item 3 below considers decisions in more detail.

Constructions to express certainty or prediction:

(1) *will* verb

(2) *be going to* verb

Examples:

(1) It *will* [rain] tomorrow.

(2) It *is going to* [rain] tomorrow.

2. *Expressing intentions already established*

The ability to discuss one's personal plans or intentions requires different language strategies than are generally used in a news article. This ability involves deciding upon plans as well as discussing plans that have already been established, both for the immediate and distant future. Here in item 2, we shall consider only the act of discussing decisions that have already been made, since the act of making decisions requires a different grammatical construction in English. Discussing pre-determined intentions covers a wide range, from what time *you are going to* [have] dinner, to what you *are going to* [wear] to the party next week, to what you *are going to* [do] when you retire. In spoken Japanese such concepts are often expressed with *<naninani> suru tsumori*. Notice that although *will* may occasionally be used by native speakers to express pre-determined intentions, *will* does not specifically contain the meaning of pre-determination, and *will* can be used to specifically exclude this meaning. (See especially part 3 for a more detailed explanation about *will*).

Constructions to express pre-determined decisions:

(1) *be going to* [verb]

(2) *be* [verb]*ing*

(3) *plan to* [verb]

(4) *be planning to* [verb]

(5) *intend to* [verb].

(6) *will be* [verb]*ing*

(7) *will* $\boxed{\text{verb}}$

<u>Examples:</u>

(1) We *are going to* $\boxed{\text{have}}$ supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(2) We *are* $\boxed{\text{hav}}$*ing* supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(3) We *plan to* $\boxed{\text{have}}$ supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(4) We *are planning to* $\boxed{\text{have}}$ supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(5) We *intend to* $\boxed{\text{have}}$ supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(6) We *will be* $\boxed{\text{hav}}$*ing* supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(7) We *will* $\boxed{\text{have}}$ supper at 6 o'clock tonight.

(1) and (2) are the constructions most likely to occur in speech when the decision has already been made about the timing of supper. In (7), we can see that *will* is certainly possible and does not sound awkward, but since *will* can also be used to express a decision being made, without more context we do not know whether the speaker is indicating a decision being made, making a promise, indicating strength of resolve (insisting), or announcing a pre-determined course of action. In American English at least, I believe the former (a decision being made or a promise) are far more likely than the latter (announcing a pre-determined plan). We do not often use this construction to indicate a pre-determined course of action unless we need to express insistence (strong determination).

3. *Making decisions about intentions*

Making up your mind about what you are going to do at some point in the future, whether the immediate or distant future, is also far more common in spoken personal language than in formal writing. *Will* is used as an expression of the human willpower both to make decisions and to insist. Let's look at a clear contrast between the use of *will* and *be going to*. A

person might say either "I'*ll* get up early tomorrow" or "I'*m going to* get up early tomorrow." We can assume that the person saying "I'*ll* get up early tomorrow" is making a decision, an offer, or a promise or even insisting that this is the case. These are the concepts that the student needs to connect to *will*. The expression in some way involves the person using his or her willpower, and "I'*ll* get up early tomorrow" resembles *ashita hayaoki shimasu yo* in Japanese. However, when we hear someone say "I'*m going to* get up early tomorrow," we can assume that the person is announcing a pre-determined intention, corresponding to *ashita hayaoki suru (tsumori)* in Japanese.

The contrast between *will* and *be going to* can be seen even more clearly when we use the question form. Let's look at two questions whose only difference is the use of these two grammatical forms: "*Will* you give Jane a ride home after the party?" and "*Are* you *going to* give Jane a ride home after the party?" For a native speaker, these questions will not be understood as having the same meaning. The question with *will* is clearly requesting that you give Jane a ride. The speaker is requesting that you use your *will*power to make that decision. However, the second question is clearly not a request for action, but merely asking for information, namely whether you have already made plans to give Jane a ride. Students need to understand that *will* is used to make decisions, offers, and promises in the form "I'*ll* do it" (= *shimasu yo!*) and not to announce the pre-established intentions discussed in item 2 above. If they make this connection, students will have a much better chance of not dropping the ball during a full contact exchange with a native speaker.

Construction to express offers, promises, decisions being made:

(1) *will* verb

<u>Examples</u>

(1-a) I'*ll* $\boxed{\text{help}}$ you with that.

(1-b) I'*ll* $\boxed{\text{give}}$ you a ride home.

(1-c) I'*ll* $\boxed{\text{play}}$ you a game.

4. <u>Discussing schedules</u>

A special function requiring future time involves discussing schedules. I would like to make a clear distinction between the act of merely discussing plans and the act of discussing schedules or timetables, especially those involving time lines as laid out in a scheduler. When native English speakers consult their little black schedule books, the most likely verb construction used to talk about their appointments is the simple present, e.g., "I $\boxed{\text{meet}}$ John on Thursday, I $\boxed{\text{go}}$ to Osaka on Friday, and I $\boxed{\text{come back}}$ here on Saturday." When we hear the simple present, we usually assume the person is consulting a schedule, either visually or mentally. This is a little different than simply announcing a pre-determined intention such as "I'm going to meet John on Thursday," or "I'm meeting John on Thursday." When the simple present is used, students need to think of little black scheduler books.

Of course, we can also use the present continuous plus future time indicator or use *be going to* for these concepts, but the use of the present simple is quite common here. Probably the reason we have developed this habit of reading schedules with the simple present is that often schedules are repeated events, and the present simple is used to express cyclic or recurring events. For example, we can say "I play soccer on Sunday" to indicate that every Sunday we play soccer. This use of present simple for timetables corresponds very closely to the Japanese expression *suru hi* and

so "I play soccer on Sunday" quite closely corresponds to 日曜日はサッカーの日です *(nichiyobi wa, sakkaa no hi desu).* In the same way as the English present simple, the Japanese construction Ital. (or *suru jikan*) can be used to indicate either a recurring event or a special timetable such as would be written in a scheduler.

Constructions for discussing schedules:

(1) verb

(2) *be* verb ing

(3) *be going to* verb

(4) *will be* verb ing

(5) *will* verb

Examples:

(1) I leave for Europe on Sunday.

(2) I'*m* leav ing for Europe on Sunday.

(3) I'*m going to* leave for Europe on Sunday.

(4) I'*ll be* leav ing for Europe on Sunday.

(5) I'*ll* leave for Europe on Sunday.

Each of these constructions has its special nuance, but the teaching target for our purposes is to tie (1), the most common form, to the act of discussing schedules, so that the student will be able to do this in more or less the same way as a native speaker.

A grammatical/situational English usage grid

These four basic situations and four basic constructions lend themselves nicely to the creation of a grid that can help students get a handle on when each these constructions is most likely to be used. For this grid, I use only the most common grammatical constructions for each situation,

i.e., the forms that I have put in bold type above. These basic forms need to have the strongest connections for the students to learn to use them naturally. Other expressions should be ignored at the basic levels, but students can, and probably should, be warned that these are merely the most common ways to express these ideas, and that they will run into other ways later.

Grammar/Situation Grid for future time

	predict	discuss plans (already made)	offer, promise, decide, request	discuss schedules
will **VERB**	◎		◎	
be going to **VERB**	◎	◎		
be **VERB**ing		◎		
VERB				◎

This grid can help students make connections tying specific concepts to specific expressions. The grid should not be represented as complete or definitive. One can easily see a close relationship between the concepts involving present simple and present continuous, and of course there is some blurring between these two forms. The line is also somewhat blurred between *will* and *be going to. Will* can sometimes be used to express predetermined intentions and *be going to* can sometimes be used to express decisions as they are being made, but there is a very clear tendency on the part of native speakers to use *will* for decisions and *be going to* for established intentions, and so the best way to help the students is to instill these common usages first as a basis for later expansion as well as for

grasping differences in nuance. This grid also does not pretend to cover all situations in which students might need to express future time. The grid does cover the more common situations the students will face, and so is useful not only to help the student achieve visual mapping, but also serves as a guide for the teacher in selecting practice material.

Language transfer doesn't work well for time concepts

Probably the most common misconception I've found among my students is that many students believe that the future tense in English consists only of *will* and that *will* can always be rendered as *daro* in Japanese. The first thing most students will attempt when trying to express future time in English is to use *will*. Quite often this happens even during practice when they are being taught to use another form. This habit must be broken to permit students to form better habits that foster more accurate understanding and communication.

The crux of the matter, the hydra head from which all the time-expression problems spring, is the difference inherent in verb time assumptions in Japanese and English. Helping students come to terms with time assumptions in English verbs will also aid in providing the foundation for proper communication about time. To help student achieve this, we need to compare the time assumptions of Japanese and English verb forms that are conventionally taught as corresponding to each other and see if we can refine the understanding. Perhaps we can get rid of some of the assumptions being transferred from Japanese that do not serve well in English.

The obvious place to begin is the present simple, in which students are taught, for example, that *go = iku, play = asobu/yaru/hiku, do = suru,* etc. In a general way, this is true, but even here some refinements need to be

made. First, we can see that in a general statement such as "I play soc-cer," or "I play the piano," *play* cannot simply be rendered as *suru or hiku*. In both cases, it would sound strange to use the present simple in Japanese. I believe this is a problem connected to time assumptions inher-ent in the verb. In English, the time assumption can either be seen as including all time, or being perpetual (including cyclical). This time assumption is not made for the present simple in Japanese, which seems to have the feeling more of a specific act, and so "I play the piano" must be rendered as *piano dekiru (dekiru = be able to)*, and "I play soccer" must be stated as *sakkaa dekiru.*

Let's look at how perpetual or cyclic action is expressed in Japanese. When English speakers say "I play soccer every Sunday," *play* is used in the perpetual or cyclic time sense. To arrive at the same meaning in Japanese requires using the present continuous (usually translated into English as *be doing*), so the sentence would become 毎週の日曜日にはサッカーをしている *(maishu no nichiyobi ni ha, sakkaa wo shite iru)*. If we translate this Japanese back into English using the present continuous, an equivalence established in most students' minds (viz., *do = suru, be doing = shite iru)*, we end up with "I am playing soccer every Sunday." This brings us to an interesting point. This sentence ("I am playing soccer every Sunday.") is completely possible in English, but the time assumption is quite different. The use of the present continuous in English here would assume a temporary situation, i.e., the situation that I happen to be involved in at the moment. A native speaker would be likely to use this form with the expression "right now" to indicate a contrast with past situa-tions or expected future situations.

These one-to-one verb form assumptions do not serve us well. No one

would be so foolish as to try and draw a one-to-one correspondence between Japanese and English vocabulary words. Vocabulary words constitute a complexly interconnected web. One Japanese word might require 5 or 10 different English expressions depending on the context, just as one English word might require 5 or 10 different Japanese expressions depending on the context. In the same way, we cannot and should not try to draw a one-to-one correspondence between Japanese and English verb forms.

In the grid presented above, let's first look at *will*. With the predictive function we might use *daro*, but *shimasu yo* will be used to correspond to the offer, promise, and decision-making functions. Next, with *be going to*, we could again use *daro* for predicting, but when discussing established plans, we might use *suru tsumori*. We need to be careful here, because *suru tsumori* in Japanese actually corresponds more closely in meaning to the English *intend to*, a less common construction. Although we want the more common expressions tied together, tying them too tightly results in mistakes because English can be used to talk about any pre-determined future, whether it includes intention or not. The previous example "It's going to rain tomorrow" cannot be translated with *suru tsumori* because no intention is involved, just as we cannot say "*It intends to rain tomorrow." in English. The present continuous + future time indication (with the same meaning as *be going to*) could also be tied to *suru tsumori*, with the same caveat. Finally, the use of the simple present for scheduling can be tied to *suru hi* or *suru jikan* in Japanese.

An even more basic confusion results from this crossover between the present simple and present continuous in English and Japanese because *suru tsumori* is often elided in Japanese to just *suru*. Hence we get 明日東京に

行く *(ashita Tokyo ni iku)*, in which *iku* would be understood as i*ku tsumori* or *iku yotei* (intention or plan), and so this is equivalent in English to "I am going to Tokyo tomorrow," but this is not equivalent to "I go to Tokyo tomorrow," as the students' language transfer would lead them to expect. Behind this confusion lies the simple convention of announcing established intentions in Japanese with *suru tsumori* (or just elided to *suru*, the present simple) when speaking of a pre-determined future event. We do the same thing in English with *be doing* (present continuous) + <future time>, so the previously established one-to-one correspondence between present simple and present continuous must be broken to enable students to make the correct assumptions. The correspondence doesn't hold up when talking about plans. When making such questions as "What do you do on Sunday?" and "What are you doing on Sunday?" students must violate both their *do = suru and their be doing = shite iru* assumptions, which would result in misunderstanding both these statements. In other words, "What do you do on Sunday?" (present simple in English) becomes 日曜日には、(いつも）何をしていますか *(nichiyobi ni ha, (itsumo) nani wo shite imasu ka)*. This must become present continuous in Japanese to corresponds to the perpetual time assumption of the present simple in English. "What are you doing on Sunday?" (present continuous in English) becomes 日曜日には、何をする（つもり）*(nichiyobi ni ha, nani wo suru (tsumori))*. Here, the present simple in Japanese is used for its future function (established plans) to match the same function involved in the English present continuous. We must be aware of the differing built-in time assumptions of the verb forms between English and Japanese.

To express future time correctly in English, we must help students understand why *be going = iku, and go = itte iru* are also possible, even

though this is the opposite of what they naturally assume with language transfer from the present simple/present continuous correspondence. That means they need to understand the time assumptions of the verb forms in both languages.

Reconnecting the linguistic associations

In his excellent book on language teaching, *Images and Options in the Classroom,*, Earl Stevick talks about the web of mental images that are all tied together to form our linguistic associations. Having one association blocked does not often cause a loss of language, because the web is so complex. Tying together linguistic associations in English for Japanese students requires not only forming new associations, but as Contrastive Analysis showed over 50 years ago, we must also aid students in breaking unhelpful language transfer and reinforcing helpful language transfer.

(The debate on Contrastive Analysis is far from over. While Delay, Burt, and Krashen argue against it in *Language Two*, any teacher in Japan can see a huge transfer of both negative and positive strategies in speech that very obviously come from the native language. As a fluent speaker of both Japanese and Spanish as second languages, I can see huge differences in the kinds of errors my Japanese and Mexican friends make in speaking English, as well as differences in the strategies they adopt that do not involve errors, and I can easily trace these differences to L-1 sources. Naturally, researchers tend to design investigations that will produce results that fit their theories.)

Let's consider now what kind of approaches can be helpful in getting the students comfortable with the new language forms that break old assumptions. I have found the grid presented above to be quite useful for tying

together the loose ends and reviewing the individual practices, but I don't advocate starting from there. A discrete item approach as advocated by Dr. Gattegno in *the common sense of teaching foreign languages* seems to be to be a better approach. After each of the grammar forms has been practiced in different situations - and usually in different class periods - then I try to draw them all together by presenting the grid and asking them to check the boxes they think will be appropriate and give examples. Students can be asked to explain in Japanese what their English sentences mean to check their understanding. If they are coming up with something silly, from unhelpful language transfer, give it back to them to correct themselves until they realize from the practice that they have already done why they are making their mistakes. This means that the discrete item work needs to already have been done.

Most teachers generally prefer to select a situation, then work on the grammar forms that are required by the situation. If we select, for example, talking about plans, we then have two major expressions that the students need to know: *be* verb*ing* and *be going to* verb. Which shall we teach first? One method of attack is to assume that since students have already thoroughly practiced the present continuous and should be very familiar with it, they can easily adapt to its use for discussing pre-determined plans. With Japanese students this approach should be a natural one because they do the same thing in Japanese, except that they use the present simple rather than the present continuous. Once they make that connection, this could be a good approach for them. It makes sense to me, and I have used it.

Another approach that I actually use more often now is to get right into the use of *be going to* verb. The reason for this change of heart is that I

often use Silent Way techniques for classroom practice. Silent Way techniques are often very similar to TPR, except that with the Silent Way, the teacher does much less modeling, and the students quickly run into their misconceptions, realizing that they have just easily understood something that they are now completely unable to reproduce. Using concrete items such as rods or pictures forces a graphic concept of what needs to be said, and the mistaken assumptions are confronted straight on when the student produces unacceptable language. In the Silent Way, the teacher does not correct the students' mistakes, but merely indicates that the language is not acceptable for that meaning, and signals the student to try again. This forces students to focus on the language, to form their own rules, and then to internalize those rules. A feedback session in the students' native language helps solidify the work.

The reason that The Silent Way has led me to switch from first teaching the present continuous when talking about plans and start using *be going to* is that the Silent Way begins with unmarked verb forms, the core sentence, so to speak. "Go to the window" and "pick up an eraser" are not merely commands, they are core concepts that can later be combined or added to and extended. Once students are familiar with such commands as "go get a piece of chalk" and "write your name on the board" these commands can be combined. Then introducing such forms as requests or future plans merely requires adding the appropriate forms directly to the core sentence. A request, for example, might combine "Will you" with "go get a piece of chalk?" (Notice that as an American, I am not going to use "go and get" here, but if you are British, please feel free.)

To discuss plans for the future, we can combine "I'm gonna" with "go get a piece of paper." With students who are quite familiar with the Silent

Way style of practice, as my students quickly become, this is a discrete item that is added for them to work on. I teach the colloquial form "gonna" instead of "be going to" because that is what they will hear and will use for most conversational English. In the feedback sessions we discuss the relationship between "gonna" and proper grammar, and in the writing time periods, we write both forms, noting which is generally used in speech and which is generally used in writing.

Very quickly the students are able to discuss a variety of plans. Then we work on making the plans, first in simple situations such as adding "I'll" to "put the chalk back," and later to forming a variety of more complicated plans with written materials or vacation flyers. After plans are made, they are then confirmed using "gonna." We might have a list of things to do and students will decide who gets which task using "will," then they can report to me using "gonna" about their decisions. The differences between "Will you go get a piece of paper" and "Are you gonna go get a piece of paper" are understood by the students in the same way that a native speaker would understand them, because we get the students to make those rules for themselves, and then to talk about and internalize those rules in native language feedback sessions. We work on linguistic items one discrete item at a time, all the while building up a more and more complex web.

Conclusion

The above are just a few considerations about the special problems of helping Japanese students achieve linguistic competence in expressing future time in English. The idea that in English the future is always expressed with *will* and that *will* can always be rendered in Japanese as *daro* are

two misconceptions that must first be broken down. Then, discrete situational targets should be selected and taught individually, first with a single verb form for each target, then adding others one at a time. If we are using a target such as discussing established plans, we will have to choose between teaching *will* or *be going to.* There are good reasons for each approach, and the one most suited to the teacher's overall teaching style should be selected. A feedback session to tie together the different forms the students have learned could be done by having the students decide what goes where in the grid and make sample sentences. Rather than tell students that they are right or wrong, the teacher should question students to help them catch their own mistakes, or to make sure students have produced correct sentences for the right reasons.

The targets selected should be appropriate to the students' ability. The students referred to in this paper are first-year university students who are not especially proficient in English and are not majoring in English. Students at higher levels will go through these steps very quickly as a review and reinforcement, and quickly move on to such activities as adding the less common forms.

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