Cognitive Considerations for the Tense Disagreement

Between the Main Clause in the Indicative Mood

and the Subordinate Clause in the Subjunctive Mood

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Abstract: This study discussed why and how it is difficult for the Japanese EFL learners to acquire ［as if --］ and ［wish --] expressions in the subjunctive mood. Some possible causes of the difficulty are (1)overgeneralization of the tense agreement rule in the indicative mood, (2)insufficient amount of input, and (3)inadequate hypothesis making in the process of acquisition.

The results of the survey on the MEXT-approved textbooks suggest that these expressions in the subjunctive mood will remain difficult to acquire unless some cognitive considerations are provided in the instruction. This paper presented four concrete ideas as such considerations.

Keywords: Cognitive, Tense, Indicative, Subjunctive

1. Introduction

It is generally recognized that the subjunctive mood is one of the most difficult grammatical items to acquire for Japanese EFL learners.　Look at the figures below.
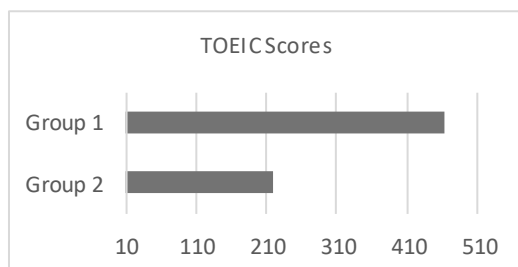

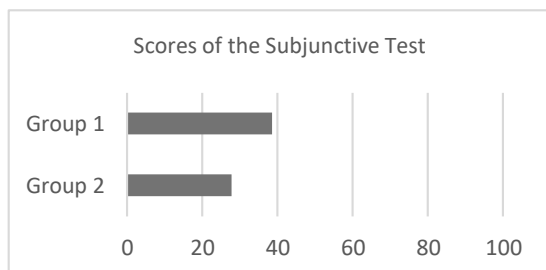Figure 1　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(n=27)

Figure 2　　　　　　　　　　　　　　(n=27)

Figures 1 and 2 show the TOEIC average scores and the average scores of the test on the subjunctive mood of two different student groups in the fourth year of TMCIT.

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The TOEIC average scores of these two groups were clearly different (one was more than twice as great as the other), however, the average scores of the test on the subjunctive mood were not as different (both of them were quite low). This suggests that even if the students improve their TOEIC scores, they do not seem to improve their understanding of the subjunctive mood as much. Therefore the instructors need to analyze why this grammatical structure can be so difficult, even for higher-level students, in order to improve their instructions.

Much of the literature points out why and how it can be difficult for the learners (e.g. Kido 2000, Nagai 2001, Itou 2002, Nomura 2007). According to this literature, some factors that are supposed to make it difficult are appropriateness of the name for each usage, different interpretations of conditional and unreal meanings, the gap between the tense of the actual event and the tense form used for expressing the event, and so on. These discussions were based mainly on the typical complex sentences using the conjunction "if." Some examples are as follows.

If I were a bird, I would fly to you now. (Subjunctive past)

If it had not been for your help, I would not have passed the test. (Subjunctive past perfect)

This study focuses on some other expressions than the above, namely, ［as if --］ and ［wish --] expressions. In most MEXT-approved high school textbooks, these expressions are presented as "some other expressions of the subjunctive mood" after the subjunctive past and the subjunctive past

perfect forms are presented. Not so much explanation seems to be given in many textbooks, and some textbooks give just two example sentences. It is not surprising that these expressions are especially hard for the learners to acquire. Therefore, this study will discuss the factors which make them difficult, and will present some ideas to improve the teaching of these expressions.

2. The Method

Based on pedagogical implications from studies in semantics and second language acquisition, some possible causes of the difficulties were discussed. Then a survey was conducted on the teaching materials, that is, the MEXT-approved textbooks, checking how those pedagogical implications derived from the above studies are treated in them.

3. What Can Be the Causes of the Difficulties?

3.1. Overgeneralization

Bolinger(1997) presented as a main basic principle in the English semantics, "One form, one meaning." It means that, if the forms are the same, the meanings are the same, or at least there is something in common. It suggests that language learners can generalize the principle and expect, "One form, one rule." If they do so, what can happen when learning [as if --] and [wish --] expressions are as follows.

The learners are familiar with the grammar exercises like "Change the underlined part into the past tense and complete the new sentence."

Ex.1

　　I <u>know</u> you were busy.

　　→I <u>knew</u> you (had been) busy.

This is an example of a popular grammar exercise for "tense agreement," which requires the learners to change the tense form of the subordinate clause based on that of the main clause. Then, how about [as if --] and [wish --] expressions which seem to share the same structure?

Ex.2

　　John <u>talks</u> as if he knew everything.

　　→John <u>talked</u> as if he (　knew　) everything.

Ex.3

　　I <u>wish</u> you were free.

　　→I <u>wished</u> you (　were　) free.

In these cases, the rule of tense agreement is not applied and the tense forms in the subordinate clauses are not changed even if those of the main clauses are changed. If the learners have acquired the tense agreement rule and are not aware of this "tense disagreement," they will choose "had known" for Ex.2 and "had been" for Ex.3. Therefore the learners need to be provided with a cognitive rationale to avoid this overgeneralization.

3.2. Lack of Input and Inadequate Hypothesis Making

A lot of studies in the second language acquisition have claimed that sufficient input is one of the biggest keys to successful acquisition (Ellis 1990, Sharwood Smith 1986, Van Patten 1996, and so on). If [as if --] and [wish --] expressions are presented simply as "some other expressions" and there are not enough explanations, there will be little chance for the learners to acquire them.

Also, Gass(1997, 2013) claimed that there are four processes in the second language acquisition between input and output, which suggest the importance of the relationship between input and hypothesis making.

＜Input＞
　　↓
　(1) Noticed Input
　　↓
　(2) Comprehended Input
　　↓
　(3) Intake
　　↓
　(4) Integration
　　↓
＜Output＞
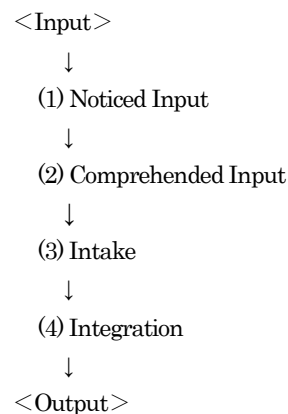
(From Gass 1997, 2013)

In order that the learners successfully acquire grammatical rules and use them for their production (speaking and writing), they must go through these processes. (1) Input first should be noticed (found in the teaching materials and paid attention to), (2) then comprehended (understood and used for hypothesis making based on the learners' knowledge that has been acquired previously), and then in process (3) used for hypothesis testing (actually used

in communicative settings), and (4) finally, the acquired rules are saved in the learners' long-term memory.

Therefore, appropriate hypothesis making depends on appropriate input. Considering all the above, what are presented in the teaching materials are extremely important for successful acquisition.

4. The Survey

A survey was conducted on ten titles of "English Communication" and ten titles of "English Expression" textbooks approved by the MEXT. The titles of the textbooks are shown in Appendices 1 and 2 respectively.

4.1. The Points Checked in the Survey

The points that were checked in the survey were as follows.

(1) Whether or not there are any combinations of the main clause in the indicative mood and the subordinate clause in the subjunctive mood ([wish --] and/or [as if --]) are presented (abbreviated as [Combination] in the tables below).

(2) Whether or not there is any reference to the main clause being in the indicative mood (abbreviated as [Indicative] in the tables below).

(3) What tense forms in the subjunctive mood are presented: past only or past plus past perfect (abbreviated as [Tense] in the tables below).

(4) Whether or not there is any reference to the distinction between the real-time and previous events that the subordinate clause represents seen from the tense of the main clause (abbreviated as [Time] in the tables below).

(5) Whether or not there is any reference to the tense disagreement between the main and subordinate clauses (abbreviated as [Disagreement] in the tables below).

4.2. The Results of the Survey and the Discussion

Tables 1 and 2 show the results of the survey on "English Communication" and "English Expression" textbooks respectively.

Table 1 "English Communication" Textbooks

	(1) Combi-nation	(2) Indic-ative	(3) Tense	(4) Time	(5) Disagree-ment
A	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	**Yes**	**Yes**
B	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No
C	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
D	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
E	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	**Yes**	No
F	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No
G	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No
H	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
I	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
J	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No

Table 2 "English Expression" Textbooks

	(1) Combi-nation	(2) Indic-ative	(3) Tense	(4) Time	(5) Disagree-ment
A	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
B	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	**Yes**	No
C	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No
D	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No
E	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
F	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	**Yes**
G	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	No	No
H	Yes	No	Past Only	No	No
I	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	**Yes**	No
J	Yes	No	Past + Past Perfect	**Yes**	No

Let us review the results of the survey point by point.

(1) [Combination]

All of the 10 titles of "English Communication" and the 10 titles of "English Expression" textbooks had the combination of the main clause in the indicative mood and the subordinate clause in the subjunctive mood as a grammatical item to be taught.

(2) [Indicative]

None of the 20 titles had any reference to the main clause being in the indicative mood, which means that all of them missed the feature of this structure, "the combination of the indicative and the subjunctive moods" in their

explanations.

(3) [Tense]

13 out of 20 titles of the textbooks presented the past and the past perfect tenses in the subordinate clauses. For the learners to acquire this structure, both of them definitely should be presented because the choice of the tense form in the subordinate clause is one of the causes of the difficulty. Unless the two tense forms are presented, the learners have no chance for hypothesis making in the understanding of this structure.

(4) [Time]

Only five out of 20 titles had a reference to the distinction between the real-time and previous events that the subordinate clause represents. For the learners to acquire this grammatical structure, they must realize that the past tense is used for the real-time events and the past perfect tense is used for the previous events. However, a majority of the textbooks missed this point.

(5) [Disagreement]

As seen in Ex.1, Ex.2 and Ex.3 in Section 3.1., the learners naturally expect tense agreement between the main and the subordinate clauses unless they are taught it is not applied in this structure (in the combination of indicative and subjunctive moods). The tables show that only two out of 20 titles referred to this tense "disagreement," and of course no reason for it was provided.

Considering the above, especially points (4) and (5), this structure will remain very difficult for the leaners to acquire unless appropriate input, sufficient and well-designed combinations of example sentences and their explanations, are provided in the teaching materials.

5. Conclusion

Considering all the above, the suggestions of this study are as follows.

(1) Not "Some Other Expressions" but "Subordinate Clauses in the Subjunctive Mood under the Main Clause in the Indicative Mood."

The instructors should clearly state that this is a combination of the indicative and the subjunctive moods, and that the subjunctive mood is used in the subordinate clause only. Unless they do so, the learners misunderstand that the main clause is also in the subjunctive mood and make wrong hypotheses in understanding the structure, and apply the rule of tense agreement.

(2) Tense Disagreement and the Cognitive Rationale

After explaining that this is a combination of two different moods, the instructors should explain that tense agreement is not applied in this case in comparison with the case it is applied between the main and subordinate clauses in the indicative moods (as in the two example sentences in Section 3.1).

Then, a cognitive rationale is needed for this agreement/disagreement because it is against the principle of "One form, one rule." One persuasive explanation is that there can not be any agreement between two different types of events. "talks" and "talked" in Ex.2 and "wish" and "wished" in Ex.3 in Section 3.1 refer to real events. However, "knew" in Ex.2 and "were" in Ex.3 refer to unreal events. In brief, "There is no agreement between reality and unreality."

(3) Real-time and Previous Events

After explaining the tense disagreement, the instructors should explain that the choice of tense form in the subordinate clause solely depends on the distinction between real-time and previous events, and that the past perfect tense is not always used when the main clause is in the past tense.

(4) Minimum Numbers of the Example Sentences

In doing the above (2) and (3) successfully, at least four example sentences are required for each of the [as if -] and [wish -] expressions, because there can be four different combination patterns of the main and subordinate clauses. None of them can be missed because each of them has a different meaning. They are as follows.

(a) Main clause in the present + subordinate clause in the past (Referring to a real-time event in the present)
    Ex) John acts as if he were the captain.
(b) Main clause in the past + subordinate clause in the past (Referring to a real-time event in the past)
    Ex) John acted as if he were the captain.
(c) Main clause in the present + subordinate clause in the past perfect (Referring to a previous unreal event in the present)
    Ex) John acts as if he had been the captain.
(d) Main clause in the past + subordinate clause in the past perfect (Referring to a previous unreal event in the past)
    Ex) John acted as if he had been the captain.

Example sentences for [wish -] expressions can be as follows.
(a) I wish I lived in Hawaii.
(b) I wished I lived in Hawaii.
(c) I wish I had lived in Hawaii.

(d) I wished I had lived in Hawaii.

As reported in Section 4.2, 13 out of 20 titles of the textbooks presented the past and the past perfect tenses in the subordinate clauses. Many of them presented only two examples, one in the past and the other in the past perfect. An example of the combination is like the below.

He speaks as if he knew everything.
The picture looked as if the famous painter had painted it.

The combination of these combination patterns, (a) and (d) in the above, is the worst one because it can easily make the learners misunderstand that the rule of tense agreement is applied. For this reason, also, at least four example sentences are needed.

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Appendix 1:
"English Communication" Textbooks Checked ("I" and/or "II")

[1] Hatakeyama, T. et al: Big Dipper English Communication. Suuken, 2018.
[2] Ichikawa, Y. et al: Unicorn English Communication. Buneido, 2018.
[3] Kaneko, A. et al: Vista English Communication. Sanseido, 2018.
[4] Kuramochi, S. et al: Grove English Communication. Buneido, 2018.
[5] Morizumi, M. et al: My Way English Communication. Sanseido, 2018.
[6] Nomura, K. et al: Perspective English Communication. Daiichigakushuusha, 2018.
[7] Shimozaki, M. et al: Crown English Communication. Sanseido, 2018.
[8] Suzuki, J. et al: Mainstream English Communication. Zoshindo, 2018.
[9] Takeuchi, O. et al: Landmark English Communication. Keirinkan, 2018.
[10] Ushiro, Y. et al: Element English Communication. Keirinkan, 2018.

Appendix 2.:
"English Expression" Textbooks Checked ("I" and/or "II")

[1] Hase, N. et al: Vivid English Expression. Daiichi Gakushuusha, 2018.
[2] Itou, N. et al: New One World English Expression. Kyouiku Shuppan, 2018.
[3] Itou, T. et al: Select English Expression. Sanseido, 2018.
[4] Kuramochi, S. et al: Grove English Expression. Buneido, 2018.
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[6] Morizumi, M. et al: My Way English Expression. Sanseido, 2018.
[7] Nakamura, M. et al: New Favorite English Expression. Tokyo Shoseki, 2018.

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