

# **Some pragmatic advantages of utilizing linguistic and cultural analysis of learners' native language and their target language in EFL classroom**

**Nobuko Trent, Ph.D.**

**Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo, Japan**

## *Abstract*

*This study first proposes to exploit comparative analysis between learners' L1 (Japanese) and L2 (English) effectively to help introductory-level Japanese college learners grasp English sentence structure, especially sentence subject. Due to the influence of Japanese sentences that are practically "subject-free, predicate-only", introductory-level learners tend to have difficulties choosing appropriate English sentence subjects even after more than six years' of prior English education (Trent, 2013). Simple comparative exercises using English translation of Japanese folktales seemed to help them to understand the critical syntactical roles of English sentence subject. This activity can remotely be an example of CLIL in which learners learn academic subjects, in this case, Japanese literature, in English. English is used as a global education tool for teaching academic subjects (e.g., Mehisto et al., 2015). This research also analyzes how Japanese learners' worldview influences their English; unlike the dynamic and objective English worldview, Japanese speakers do not focus on agents/doers but on "speech situations" shared by the participants (e.g., Kanaya, 2003). Using Japanese folktales written in English and Japanese, and discussing over anthropological worldviews that differentiated the two languages, a certain extent of learners' development was confirmed. Although using only target language in the ESL/EFL classroom has been considered ideal for learners, the learners may benefit from help with their L1 linguistic and cultural knowledge to fulfill the specific purposes of learning L2 (e.g., Kobayashi and Rinnert, 1992). The study also hypothesizes that classroom study materials in Japanese colleges, which are predominantly based on western contexts, may negatively influence Japanese students' learning, making them feel that English is owned by western cultures and people (e.g., Honna and Takeshita, 2014). In summary, Japanese native speakers' English learning may be negatively affected by the structure of their native language, cultural worldview that their language use is based on, and the learning environment that makes them perceive English as a completely foreign language. This view may suggest practical solutions for some problems of Japanese English education.*

## Keywords

Japanese, English syntax, anthropological linguistics, material development, CLIL.

## Introduction

Along with the rise of English as a global communication tool (ELF-English as a Lingua Franca), English education has become a key issue in Asian countries for diverse purposes including their international commercial, political, and cultural advancement. At the same time, a number of English languages with historical tradition of being the official language or practical second language along with each nation's native language, have been recognized as legitimate varieties of Englishes. However, the level of English skills of Japanese native speakers have not improved and stayed almost the lowest in Asia: average TOEFL scores of Japanese test-takers in 2009 was the second lowest in 30 Asian countries (Yonehara, 2013). One reason for this poor accomplishment is that in Japanese history, English has never been the official or a useful language, and it has hardly born active roles outside of English classroom until today, suggesting learners' negligible needs for English skills. On the other hand, Korea, which shares the same historical non-English background, has developed its English levels focusing on people's acquisition of practical English skills (Shibata, 2015). In contrast, for Japanese people, English is neither a second language nor ELF, but simply a foreign language even today. One psychological trait of Japanese, which is an absolute attachment to standard "white" English, especially American and British English (Kachuru, 2005), seems to encourage this poor result of Japanese English skills. Based upon the existing state, the current administration has began to implement extensive stimulus measures, including early childhood English education to improve the English proficiency level of the community. However, educators may first need to recognize two possible issues underlying this problem: Japanese speakers are unaware of the linguistic and cultural differences between Japanese and English, and English is taught in a pro-western environment in Japan.

## Background of the study

### *Syntactical differences between English and Japanese languages*

Japanese students start learning English when they are twelve, or even younger. However, as standardized test scores of Japanese indicate, this has never been enough to create an ESL (English as a Second Language) environment. A large proportion of students proceed to college without sufficient knowledge/skills of English. As a result, lower-level college learners have a wide variety of grammar problems, but one of the most serious issues is their sentence structure. English sentences are constructed around

the sentence subjects and main verbs; the sentence subject controls the rest of the sentence, so it is crucially important for the learners to have a correct understanding of English sentence subject. Learners' problem with English syntax is most likely caused by Japanese sentence structure, which is called "predicate structure." Japanese sentences have been considered to have SOV structures with a hidden S (subject) under the influence of studies of western linguistics (e.g., Kuno 1973, 1983; Kuroda, 2005; Shibatani, 1990), but Japan-born linguistic circles consider that noun, adjective, verb, or other sentence elements can singlehandedly constitute a sentence, i.e, predicate sentences in which *shukaku* (subjective-case, nominative) is "optional" along with other cases including objective, dative, locative, and instrumental cases (e.g., Mikami, 1960, 1975; Nakajima, 1987; Tsukimoto, 2009; Kanaya, 2002, 2003, 2004).

**Table 1**  
**Examples of Japanese predicate only sentences, following Kanaya (2002, 2003, 2004)**

Type of sentence	Example	English translation
(1) Verb sentence	“ <i>waratta.</i> ” laughtd	(I/You/We/He/Somebody laughed.)
(2) Adjective sentence	“ <i>tanoshii.</i> ” fun	(I am enjoying myself.)
(3) Verb sentence	“ <i>gakusei desu.</i> ” student COP	(I am a student.)

(COP=Copula; TOP=Topic particle; DAT=dative, NOM=nominative, NEG=negative morpheme, COM=complimentizer, POT=potential affix; QUOTE=quotative particle; Q=question particle)

Although there has been opposition to this simple analysis, this predicate theory matches Japanese speakers' use of the language with which S (agent/doer) is optional. This view is supported by old Japanese literatures in which predicate structures are used. For example, a famous Japanese writer, *Seishonagon* used simple predicate sentences.

*Haru wa akebono.* (In spring, it is the dawn that is most beautiful.)  
spring TOP dawn

*Natsu wa yoru.* (In summer, the nights.)  
summer TOP night

*Aki wa tsutomete.* (In autumn, the evenings.)  
autumn TOP evening

*Fuyu wa asa.* (In winter, the early mornings.)  
winter TOP morning

(From the "Pillow Book" written by *Seishonagon*, 965A.D. translated by Ivan Morris)

As this example shows, the Japanese language is historically a predicate-language without clear sentence subject (agent/doer). In fact, such predicate-oriented languages are globally more common than SV-oriented languages like English (Matsumoto, 2006).

*Influence of Japanese on learners' English sentence subjects*

Japanese sentences tend to be topic-oriented, so lower-level learners often produce sentences that wrongly use the sentence topic as the sentence subject.

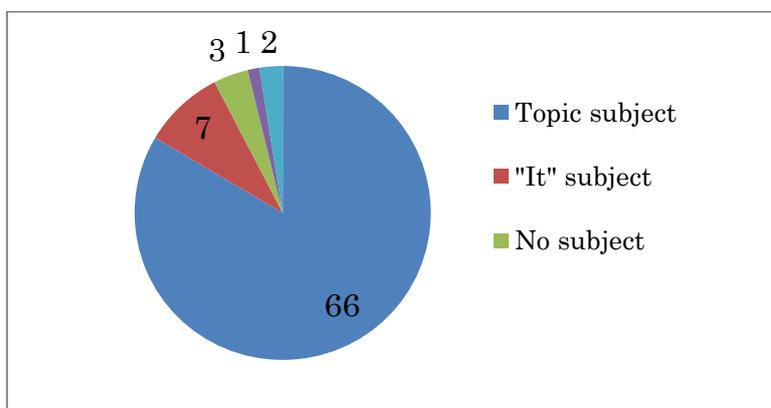
\*Sunday is dating. (\*means "ungrammatical")

A Japanese sentence that corresponds with the above English sentence is:

*Nichiyoo* *wa* *deeto* *da.* (I will have a date on Sunday.)  
 Sunday TOP dating COP

A data collected from about 700 analyzable sentences written by 56 introductory-level learners showed that 11% of the sentences had inappropriate sentence subjects, and 66% of them used sentence topic as the sentence subject (topic-subject) indicating that the learners are deeply influenced by Japanese sentence structure (Figure 1).

Besides "topic-subject", there were several common patterns of incorrect sentence subjects among Japanese learners of English. Table 2 shows examples of these wrong patterns.



**Figure 1. Frequency of different types of inappropriate subjects**

**Table 2. Examples of common subject errors obtained from classwork**

Types of subject error	Examples of English sentence
(1) "It" subject	(ex.) "Where are you from?" " <u>*It</u> is Japan."
(2) "There" subject	(ex.) <u>*There</u> is an experience of going to the U.S.
(3) Fragmented subject	(ex.) <u>*The problem</u> , money doesn't exist.
(4) No subject	(ex.) <u>*Can't</u> think about the future.
(5) Mixed subject	(ex.) *Oscar Wilde wants to say that if <u>I</u> do good things, <u>we</u> 'll be repaid.

---

Understanding Japanese sentence structures enables us to see why learners produced the wrong sentences listed in Table 2.

(1) “It” subject

In English, “it” is used for a sentence with inanimate sentence subjects such as “It is raining”, “It is 5 o’clock”, so the learners use “it” when they do not know what the right subject is. Japanese sentences meaning “I’m from Japan” commonly do not show “I.”

*Nihon desu.*  
Japan COP  
(I’m from Japan.)

(2) “There” subject

The Japanese word “*aru*” (to exist) that is frequently used in Japanese is translated as “there” and wrongly used. The following Japanese sentence with the verb “*aru*” is grammatical.

*America e itta keikenn ga aru.*  
The U.S. DAT went experience NOM exist  
(I’ve been to the U.S.)

(3) “Fragmented” subject

Learners simply make the real sentence topic fragmented from the main sentence structure, and use the topic word wrongly as the sentence topic.

*Mondai wa okane ga nai koto da.*  
Problem TOP money NOM NEG COMP COP  
(The problem is that I do not have money.)

(4) No subject

Learners do not use any sentence subject as in Japanese sentences.

*Shourai ni tsuite nanimo kangae rare-nai.*  
future DAT about nothing think POT NEG  
(I cannot think about anything about future.)

(5) Mixed subject

In Table 2, sentence (5) has mixed subject “I” and “we”. This seemed to be caused by the influence of Japanese sentence below in which no doers are clear.

*Osukaa wairudo wa moshi iikoto wo surebas ono mukui ga aru to iitakatta no da.*  
Oscar Wilde TOP if good thing OBJ do CONDI its reward NOM exist QUOTE say wanted NOM COP  
(Oscar Wilde wanted to say that if we do something good, we’ll be rewarded.)

The analysis of wrong sentence subjects employed by the introductory-level learners makes it clear that they are trying to create English sentences using their knowledge of Japanese sentences. Thus, it was hypothesized that it would benefit students to understand the difference of the sentence structures and how they transfer Japanese to English in some obvious ways.

## Developing learners' syntactical awareness of the languages

### *Using Japanese folktales to teach English*

For the purpose of helping students to recognize the necessity of a sentence subject in English sentences and how commonly Japanese sentences lack sentence subjects, simple exercises were used in class where learners read Japanese folktales in Japanese and complete their English translation filling in the blanks for the sentence subject and main verb.

The example below is from the story "The men who became horses."

馬になった男

むかし、むかし、三人の旅人が伊勢神宮に向けて旅しておりました。三人は、その旅籠に泊まることにしました。三人は、晩ご飯に、見たこともない、おいしい饅頭を出されました。次の朝、目が覚めると、何と、三人は、馬になっていました。「うわ、どうなってんだ。」と一頭の馬が、騒ぎながら、馬の言葉で宿の主人が、見知らぬの男と一緒に部屋に入ってきました。彼は、馬「いい馬じゃな。」と言うと、主人にお金を渡しました。三頭の馬は、仲買人に引かれて、外に出ると、お金持ちの商人に売。商人は、馬に、重い荷物や品物をお客さんの家まで運ばせました。「重いな。」「疲れるな。」「きついな。」と馬たちは言いましたが、人間に一日中働かされて、食べさせてもらうものは、残り物だけでした。

**The man that became a horse**

Long, long ago ( ) to Ise-Shrine  
After walking and walking from Edo (Now Tokyo) for s  
there.  
( ) served strange but delicious 'Kusa-Mochi' (K  
When ( ) in the next morning, to their great su  
"Wow, ( ) to us?" said ( ) in a horse  
The inn keeper came into their room with another man, w  
"What wonderful horses ( )!" said the ( )  
The three horses were pulled by him to the outside and so  
The rich merchant used them to carry heavy luggage and

Fifty-six introductory-level students read Japanese texts and understood the actors/doers of the sentences that were not clear in Japanese sentences, and filled in the blanks in English texts with sentence subjects and main verbs. Students did this exercise every two to three weeks in their reading class for six months, April to July 2013. They read several stories, and each session lasted 30 minutes. In the beginning, students showed some difficulties, but as the semester went on, it seemed like the activity went smoothly as students learned the concept of English sentence subject. Before this exercise started, the students took a translation quiz from Japanese sentences to English sentences, and after six months, they took another quiz. Although it is difficult to claim the exercises contributed to their improvement since they took other English classes simultaneously, the proportion of wrong sentence subjects noticeably decreased.

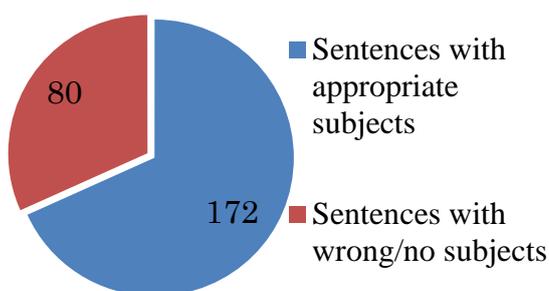


Figure 2. **Before** "Folk tale" exercises

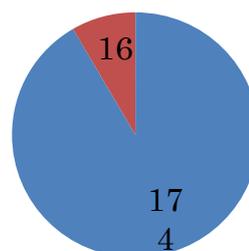


Figure 3. **After** "Folk tale" exercises

In order to see the long-term effect, the author continued to use the folktale activities until this semester (July, 2015). One of the reasons for implementing this activity is that students showed interest in reading Japanese stories in English. It was a good opportunity to witness that their familiar Japanese contents written in English may motivate students to read English texts. This is partly related to the idea of CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning).

#### *Content and Language Integrated Learning*

CLIL emphasizes the importance of learning study content and language together. Its basic strategy is to use a foreign language to learn academic subjects (Mehisto, et.al, 2015). In Japan, a CLIL approach has started to be used to teach history and other subjects. CLIL courses are basically taught by English teachers, so teachers need knowledge of the academic subjects they teach, and students need to be interested in the content knowledge they are learning in English classes. One merit of the CLIL approach is that it may be able to make students learn a foreign language because they are interested in academic subjects themselves. In this sense, in the author's classroom, the students were first interested in Japanese stories, and it led them to learn English, so there may be a benefit to a CLIL-like approach of learning English.

#### *Classroom activities of analyzing English and Japanese speakers' worldviews*

Provided that learners may become familiar with the concept of English sentence subject, it was hypothesized that analyzing and discussing the different language cultures of English and Japanese, which are the basis of the languages, would encourage the students to understand English sentence subject better.

Linguistic anthropologists point out that Japanese speakers culturally hold a static and subjective worldview, while English native speakers' worldview is dynamic and objective (e.g., Morita, 1998; Kanaya 2003). This "objective" character of English worldview requires actors/doers in English sentences. Table 3 shows some examples:

**Table 3. Some examples of English dynamic and Japanese static worldviews**

Japanese expressions		English translation
<i>Koko wa doko desu-ka.</i> here TOP where COP-Q	v.s.	Where am I?
<i>Yama ga mi-eru.</i> mountains NOM see-POT	v.s.	I see the mountains.
<i>kodomo ga imasu.</i> Children NOM exist	v.s.	I have children.

Kanaya (2003) said that in English speakers' worldview, the speakers objectively look at the situation from "above" like seeing it with bird's eye view; thus, the sentence subject is necessary to show "who does what." On the other hand, Japanese speakers' worldview is inside each speech situation, which is shared by other participants; thus, the speaker does not need to mention "who did what" but need only to express the resulting situations subjectively.

Assuming that being aware of how they see the world and accordingly, knowing how their view influences their language is beneficial for the learners, in April, 2014, 20 introductory students analyzed Japanese worldview using an handouts from some anthropologists (Appendix 1). Students contributed their analysis to class and their observations to indicate that learners are aware that speech situations are more important to Japanese speakers than "who did what." Their answers to the questionnaire are available in Appendix 2. This short anthropological study drew learners' attention by giving them a good opportunity to consider their linguistic behavior and background culture in native language.

### **Development of learner's awareness of English as a global language; textbook analysis and material development**

Japanese folktale activities and anthropological sessions covering differences in cultural worldviews of the two languages seemed to help learners understand the critical differences of Japanese and English sentence structure, and they realized how they use their native language in daily practice. At the same time, it was noticed that the learners enjoyed their traditional folktales in English, and this reminded the author that English is still regarded as purely a foreign language to explain foreign events, not a global language for any communities (e.g., Honna, 2006). This EFL mentality may need to be changed if Japanese educators desire to make English as prevalent for Japanese speakers' legitimate second language as it is in many Asian countries.

In order to see the status quo of Japanese learners' exposure to English texts, the most popular textbooks for reading class from four major Japanese publishers were examined. The elements for analysis were proportion of western or Japanese elements in each textbook. In July, 2015, thirty textbooks that the publishers claimed to be most popular were analyzed on the basis of:

- (1) Chapter topics (specifically Western, Japanese, other cultures, or universal)
- (2) Pictures and drawings of people, scenery, events, goods, and others used in the textbooks (specifically white, Japanese, black, Hispanic, other cultures, or mixed)

Table 4 indicates that, although they are published by Japanese companies, the topics English textbooks used widely in Japanese colleges tend to deal with western events and cultures, and Table 5 shows the numbers of pictures and drawings of a variety of cultures included in the textbooks.

	Western topics	Japanese topics	Universal topics incl. Japanese	Universal topics not incl. Japanese	Other ethnic cultural topics	Total Chapter
Publisher A (8 books)	56	4	28	6	23	110
Publisher B (7 books)	38	20	7	10	11	87
Publisher C (6 books)	55	8	44	21	2	120
<b>Total</b>	<b>149</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>317</b>

Table 4. Chapter topics of Japanese major reading textbooks for college classrooms

	People							Scenery, events, things, etc.			
	"White"	Japanese	Hispanic	Black	Middle-East	Asians other than Japanese	Mixed Group	Western	Japanese	Others	Total
Publisher A	133	31	6	13	3	22	16	71	14	74	390
Publisher B	51	5	11	11	16	13	11	166	25	40	342
Publisher C	16	12	1	3	1	10	0	43	12	9	114
Publisher D	181	25	4	13	1	54	2	270	12	130	882
<b>Total</b>	<b>381</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>550</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>1728</b>

Table 5. Pictures and drawings used in Japanese major reading textbooks for college classrooms

As these data show, western, especially “white” elements are visually dominant in the textbooks used in Japanese classrooms. About 47% of the chapter topics are about the western world, and more than 53% of the pictures are western people or matters. In a sense, using western elements are good in showing western culture and sights to learners. However, at the same time, too much emphasis on western matters, teaching materials might encourage the learners to associate the English language to only western world, despite it ought to be regarded one of the global languages.

### Conclusions and limitations of the study

This research intends to seek for ways to help introductory-level college students to learn English grammar through linguistic and cultural viewpoints, and also to help them become aware that learning English is not learning about “white people’s world.” As the CLIL concept advocates, students’ interest in the learning contents would most likely encourage their learning the target language that is used as a content-learning tool. Since the research length was limited this time for the text-comparison activities and anthropological approach, and during the research sessions, learners also learned from other English courses, the real benefits of this study are not unclear. Longer-term

observation of students' performance is needed and currently proceeding. As to the western-oriented trend of Japanese textbooks, more research involving larger scale of materials will be helpful. Future studies require students' positive or negative observations regarding learning materials that involve non-western contents.

## Appendix 1

Japanese worldview	*English sentence with Japanese worldview	Worldview in English sentences
<p>● 「ある」「いる」「なる」 Static view</p> <p>子供がいます。 約束があります。 アメリカへ行ったことがあります。 春になりました。</p> <p>● Subjective viewpoint. Looking at the world from only speaker's viewpoint. (Showing no agents)</p> <p>京都が見たい。 英語がわかります。 もう少し時間がかかります。 新宿が好きです。 富士山が見えます。 ここはどこ？</p> <p>● Assuming the topic is shared and understood without mentioning it.</p> <p>こんにゃくは太らない。 桜なら京都だね。 今日はデートだ。</p>	<p>*There are children. *There is an appointment. *There is an experience of going to the U.S. *It became spring.</p> <p>*Kyoto wants to see. *English is understood. *A little more time will take. *Shinjuku likes *Mt. Fuji can be seen. *Where is here?</p> <p>*Konnyaku doesn't get fat. *Sakura is Kyoto. *Today is dating.</p>	<p>● 「する」 Dynamic view</p> <p>I have children. I have an appointment. I have been to the U.S.</p> <p>Spring has come.</p> <p>● Objective viewpoint. Showing agents/doers clearly.</p> <p>I want to see Kyoto. I understand English. We need some more time. I like Shinjuku. I see Mt. Fuji. Where am I?</p> <p>We won't get fat if we eat konnyaku. If you want to see the best Sakura, you should go to Kyoto. I have a date today.</p>

## Appendix 2

Responding to the question why Japanese say “yama ga mieru (The mountains can be seen)” instead of “I see the mountains”, the learners' answers show their insights:

(1) Japanese speakers often assume “I” as the subject when they are speaking, so they do not need to say who sees the mountain.

- (2) We do not need to say “I” because it is obvious from the situation.
- (3) Japanese sentences are understandable without sentence subjects, so we emphasize “the mountains.” The differences between English and Japanese may be focusing on either “the mountains” or on “It is I who sees the mountains.”
- (4) If we say “I see the mountains”, it sounds like forcing the listeners to look at the mountains, so we say “the mountains are visible as you see.”
- (5) Japanese people are modest/polite, so we do not want to be offensive by stating the obvious matters.
- (6) Japanese speakers do not want to limit the subject to “I” only because everybody can see the mountains. We have a wider viewpoint.
- (7) If “I” is used, it sounds like that the information “there are mountains” is owned by only the speaker.
- (8) Japanese would like to involve others into the situation they are facing, while English sentences are more focused on “I”.
- (9) In the Japanese worldview, speakers always invite their listeners into the speakers’ world, sharing information.

## References

- Honna, N. (2006). East Asian Englishes. In B.B. Kachru, Y. Kachru, & C.L. Nelson (Eds.) *The Handbook of World Englishes* (pp. 114-29). Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Honna, N. and Takeshita, Y. (2014). English as an international language and three challenging issues in English language teaching in Japan. In R. Marlina, & B. A. Giri (Eds.) *The pedagogy of English as an international language: Perspectives from scholars, teachers, and students, English language education I* (pp. 65-78). Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Kachuru, B.B. (2005). *Asian Englishes: Beyond the canon*. Ong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Kanaya, T. (2002). *Nihongo ni shugo wa iranai* [No need of sentence subject for Japanese]. Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha.
- Kanaya, T. (2003). *Nihongo bunpoo no nazo o toku* [Solving the mystery of Japanese grammar]. Tokyo, Japan: Chikuma Shinsho.
- Kanaya, T. (2004). *Eigo nimo shugo wa nakatta* [English did not have sentence subject]. Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha.
- Kobayashi, H. & Rinnert, C. (1992). Effects of first language on second language writing: Translation versus direct composition. *Language Learning* 42:2, 183-215.
- Kuno, A. (1973). *The structure of the Japanese language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Kuno, A. (1983). *Shin nihon bunpo* [New Japanese grammar]. Tokyo, Japan: Taishukan.
- Kuroda, S. (2005). *Nihongo kara mita seisei bunpo* [Generative grammar viewed from Japanese]. Tokyo, Japan: Iwanami shoten.
- Matsumoto, K. (2006). *Sekai gengo no shiza* [Perspectives on world languages]. Tokyo, Japan: Sanseido.
- Mehisto, P. et al. (2015) *CLIL Content and language integrated learning*. (Eds) Sasajima, S. Tokyo: Sanshusha.

- Mikami, A. (1960). *Zoo wa hana ga nagai* [As for elephants, their trunks are long]. Tokyo, Japan: Kuroshio Shuppan.
- Mikami, A. (1975). *Mikami Akira ronbunshu* [Collection of papers by Akira Mikami]. Tokyo, Japan: Kuroshio Shuppan.
- Morita, Y. (1998). *Nihonjin no hasso, nihongo no hyogen* [Japanese ideas and Japanese expressions]. Tokyo, Japan: Chuokoron.
- Nakajima, F. (1987). *Nihongo no kozo* [Structure of Japanese]. Tokyo, Japan: Iwatani Shoten.
- Shibata, M. (2015). Eigo kyoiku ni okeru gengotaido eno torikumi: gakushuueigo to ringa furanka eigo [Language attitude in English education: English to be learned and English as a lingua franca], *Asian English Studies, The Japanese Association for Asian Englishes* vol. 17 pp. 30-49.
- Shibatani, M. (1990). *The language of Japan*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Tsukamoto, H. (2009). *Nihongo wa ronriteki de aru* [The Japanese language is logical]. Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha.
- Trent, N. (2013). The challenge of English sentence subjects (*shugo*) to Japanese Learners. In R. Chartrand, S. Crofts, & G. Brooks (Eds.) *The 2012 Pan-SIG Conference Proceeding* (pp. 187-195). Hiroshima: JALT
- Yonehara, K. (2013). *Nihonjin no eigoryoku sekai ranking* [World ranking of Japanese speakers of English]. Ivy league English School.  
<http://www.ivyleague-english.com/newpage5.html> Retrieved July 17, 2015.