The Challenges of Forming and Answering Yes/No Questions for Japanese Learners of English

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Abstract

Non-simultaneous second language acquisition suffers more than it benefits from the interfering effects of the first and second languages. Foreign language acquisition becomes even more vulnerable to the interference effects of the mother tongue, especially the older the learners are and the further apart the two languages are. Japanese and English are as different as two languages can be, and there are many problematic areas for Japanese EFL/ESL learners. These may be lexical, grammatical, phonological, pragmatic, or even cultural. This study looks specifically at the challenges Japanese learners of English face when forming and answering Yes/No questions. The authors particularly draw from their experiences teaching English in Japan, and they point out the differences in function between English and Japanese Yes/No questions, as well as their being potential sources of confusion and a barrier to effective communication.

One glance at the title of this article may lead you to wonder if the formation of yes-no questions is really so important? What's more, are they not really easy to use anyway? We hear in predominantly English speaking countries such simple questions as "tea?" or "ok?" Also, answering yes-no questions by nature is restricted to the option of only two answers: yes-no (Huddlestone & Pullum 2005: 162). Writing a whole article about this topic would appear to be overkill in the extreme, wouldn't it?

Possibly for anyone learning English for the purpose of sightseeing, just mastering simple one-word questions and answers will suffice. The fact is though, that many people who choose to (or are obliged to) learn English require a higher capability in English usage (for academic or business situations for example). For people in this kind of situation, a number of challenges are thrown up by yes-no questions. Firstly, their formation requires a grasp of the tense and aspect system of English. Added to

this are the inverted forms that yes-no questions utilize and the formation of responses that uses *ellipsis* (explained within). The second challenge concerns meaning and function. In conversation, a question may have some purpose other than a simple request for a yes-no answer. Some canonical forms for questions may also be used for other functions. For example; *Can you give me a hand?* is a request for action as opposed to a request for information (Williams 1990: 160).

In this paper we will start with an analysis of the grammar for forming and answering yes-no questions. This will be expanded into a discussion on the functions of yes-no questions. Following this is a contrastive study of yes-no questions in Japanese and English to ascertain the specific challenges they present for Japanese learners of English (JLE). Finally, we will outline some teaching methods in light of the discussion.

Forming yes-no questions

A prominent feature of the grammar of yes-no questions in English is the inversion of the subject and the first auxiliary (acting as operator) (Quirk et al. 1985a: 79). This provides the first hurdle for a learner wanting to master their formation.

When the declarative clause has an auxiliary (e.g. *He HAD given the girl an apple.*), the auxiliary (acting as the operator) is reversed with the subject (*Had he given the girl an apple?*) (Quirk et al. 1985a: 79). *Be* is also used as an operator in yes-no questions; *Is he really making things so difficult?* (Leech et al. 1982: 80). A lexical *be* can act as the operator when it is the main verb. For example; *Is he happy?* or *Was he late?* (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 192). When *have* is the main verb, there are more than one pattern. American English tends to use the dummy operator *do* (see the next section); *Does he have a car?* British English uses *Has he a car?* or *has he got a car?* (p. 192). When there is no auxiliary present in the declarative clause, the *dummy* auxiliary *do* is used when forming the yes-no question. *He scratched my back* becomes *Did he scratch my back?* (Leech & Deuch 1982: 80).

Potential difficulties for learners

The generally complex aspect and tense system of English can be problematic for learners. Auxiliaries *have, is* and *do* have to agree with the subject; *I have, he has, he does, we do* etc. They also alter to express aspect; *we are, we were* etc. (Sinclair 2006: 453). The use of the same lexicon in different aspect forms (*Is he Japanese?* compared to *Is he playing golf?*) raises the chance of intralingual errors occurring. The use of the dummy *do* creates two issues for learners in that it does not appear in the declarative clause so doesn't follow the same rule as other auxiliaries and it can also be confused with the lexical verb *do*.

The use of inversions is a further addition to an already complex system. Arguably, inversion is more important in yes-no questions in that failure to utilize it creates a clause with another function. If inversion is omitted from an information question (e.g. *what you're doing?*) it is merely erroneous. If *are you Japanese?* is changed to *you are Japanese?*, it indicates a change in function (see next section). For communication purposes this change is probably not problematic but it is advantageous for learners to be aware of the differences in function of these two kinds of questions.

Answering inverted yes-no questions

Answers to yes-no questions have strict rules that must be followed if they are to be formed correctly. In English, it is usually unnecessary to repeat information which is predictable through context. *Ellipsis* is the process of omitting such information.

> *Are they paying you for the work?*
> > *Yes, they are paying me for the work* (unreduced).
> > *Yes, they are doing so* (pro-form).
> > *Yes, they are* (ellipsis).
> > > (Quirk et al. 1985b: 82)

It can be seen that the subject and auxiliary are returned to the non-inverted order. When there is no auxiliary present in the declarative form, the dummy *do* is used; *Do you play the piano?—Yes, I do* (Eastwood 1984: 34).

Yes-no questions can of course be answered with a simple *yes* or *no*. There is a danger though that such a response may be perceived as abrupt or offensive to the listener. The elliptical form is often just a mirror of the front of the question clause (Do they…? = yes, they do …), but change in tense and aspect and pronoun use can make this process difficult for learners, especially in conversation. The next section moves on to the different functions of yes-no questions.

Functions of yes-no questions

Mastery of yes-no questions requires more

than just the perfection of their grammatical form. When we process any language, we are not only trying to make sense of the words and grammar, but also the speaker's intentions. This is the *function* of what they are saying (Thornbury 1999: 6).

Yes-no question forms are often used in conversation to perform some function other than a simple request for a yes-no answer (e.g *do you drink?* could be an offer, Thornbury 1999: 6). Questions asked without the inverted form, negative questions and assertive forms all indicate a presupposition of the listener's response. The use of modal auxiliaries in yes-no question forms also alters the function of the question from interrogative to some other mood (Sinclair 2006: 204–205).

Questions without inversion and negative questions

Questions can be asked in the declarative form without the subject-auxiliary inversion pattern that we saw earlier. These questions use the rising tone of a question. For example; *You got home safely then?* (Leech & Svartik 2002: 132). The negative form of yes-no questions is formed by placing *n't* after the operator; *Haven't you finished yet?* or *Have you not finished yet?* in more formal English (Eastwood 1984: 35). Declarative questions are usually used in a conducive manner. That is, they convey the speaker's predisposition to a particular kind of response (Quirk et al. 1985: 814). Generally, a positive construction implies the speaker's expectation of a positive answer from the listener, and a negative construction a negative one (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 195).

Negative yes-no questions are also conducive. Eastwood (1984) outlines three uses for negative questions. To express surprise (*Can't you ring me?*), as a complaint (*Can't you be quiet?*) or to confirm some truth (*Didn't I see you last night?*) (p. 35).

Assertive forms: Positive & Negative orientation

Yes-no questions can be given positive orientation by the inclusion of assertive forms (*somewhere, somebody, some* and *sometimes*, Quirk et al. 1985b: 85). *Did someone call last night?* (Is it true someone called last night?) has a preemptive element that the answer will be positive (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 193). There are also forms that give a sentence a negative orientation: *never, no, nobody* and *nothing* (Quirk et al. 1985b: 85). These forms presuppose a negative answer.

The importance of these functions

If a learner is unaware of these functions, two issues arise. Firstly, in the role of the listener, they may misconstrue the interlocutor's true intentions, causing a breakdown in communication, or even offence. In the role of the speaker, if a learner is unable to use these forms and functions, they will be lacking some useful tools for conducting conversation and expressing nuances in English.

Modal yes-no questions

Modal auxiliaries used in yes-no questions present another set of challenges for learners. They are *can, could, may, might, must, will, would, shall, should, ought to, have to, need, dare* (Huddlestone & Pullum 2006: 54–58). Yes-no questions with modal auxiliaries use inversion (*May I leave now?*). There are, however, certain limitations and shifts in meanings (Quirk & Greenbaum 1973: 195). For example, *shall* is used predominantly with the first person (*shall I..., shall we?*), and *may* (probability) is not used in question form (p. 196).

The use of modals alters the mood of the question from interrogative to others such as offers and invitations (*Can I help you?*), requests, orders and instructions (*Can I have my hat back please? Will you tell Watson I shall be a little late?*) (Sinclair 2006: 205). The change of mood impacts on the form of answer that a learner is required to give. Functions such as requests, offers, invitations and suggestions usually require more than short answers (Eastwood 1984). *Can*

I borrow your pen?—Sorry, I'm using it to fill in this form (pp. 34–35). In this situation a short answer in the negative (*no, you can't*) though not ungrammatical, would be perceived as impolite.

Next we will analyze the issues that Japanese learners of English (JLE) can experience when using the various forms and functions of yes-no questions.

Differences in Japanese and English yes-no questions

One method of locating areas of potential difficulty for a particular group of learners is to compare differences in that group's first language (L1) and the target language to predict possible transference from the learner's L1. There is now general agreement that the distance between languages has an effect on the level of transference from the L1 to the target language (Ellis 2004). This analysis of the Japanese language will focus on areas that are particularly relevant to the formation of yes-no questions and specific elements that may cause transference issues for JLE.

Some general points

> **Suzuki san wa yakyuu o yarimasu.**
> *Mr Suzuki plays baseball.*
> (Mutsuko et al. 1994: 98)

From the example sentence we can see that the word order of Japanese is subject-object-verb. The qualifier precedes the qualified, topic precedes comment and subordinate precedes main (Thompson 1987: 216). There are no auxiliary verbs, and particles such as *wa* and *o* are utilised. Unlike English auxiliary verbs, these do not change to express tense, aspect or subject/verb agreement (Mutsuko et al. 1994: 98).

Japanese lexical verbs are self-contained and can be inflected to show tense, imperative, tentative, passive, polite and infinitive forms (Shibatani 1987: 751). If modal verbs are used, they follow the main verb, instead of preceding

it as they do in English (Thompson 1987: 216). The subject and object are optional depending on context. In fact, *Iku?* (*Do you go/Are you going?*) (Miura & McGloin 2005: 36) would constitute a complete utterance in conversational Japanese.

Possible transference issues for JLE

English auxiliary verbs are prominent in the expression of tense, aspect and subject-verb agreement. Japanese on the other hand has no direct equivalent so it is not uncommon to hear our learners uttering; *do he play golf?, are you there yesterday?, or have you went there?* This problem also extends to the use of modal verbs. Although Japanese has a range of modal words to express a complex politeness system it has little structural relation to English. It is therefore necessary to explain the rules of form to learners. For example, when talking about ability *can* changes to *could* to express a change in aspect, but when used in requests, *can* changing to *could* expresses a greater level of politeness (Sinclair 2006: 221–222).

The optional nature of the subject and object in Japanese can also be transferred by learners to English. English has some ellipsis of questions (e.g. *are you happy?* can become *happy?*) but this is limited in its usage (Quirk et al. 1985b: 898). JLE often omit the object (*did you enjoy?*) and sometimes have difficulty with finding the correct subject during conversation.

(i) *Forming yes-no questions in Japanese*

> **Suzuki san wa yakyuu o yarimasu ka.**
> *Does Mr. Suzuki play baseball?*
> (Mutsuko et al. 1994: 98)

There are differences between English and Japanese formation of yes-no questions. In Japanese they are formed by adding the particle *ka* to the end of the clause and there is no change in word order from declarative to interrogative. The interrogative here is indicated by a rising intonation, and this is universal to all interrogatives in Japanese, not just yes-no

questions, in contrast to English (Thompson 1987: 215).

(ii) Forming declarative questions

JLE can sometimes be heard using declarative questions in conversational situations where the non-conducive inverted question would be more suitable. For example, they are sometimes heard asking their interlocutor: *"your hometown is beautiful?"* even though they have no prior information on which to presuppose. This is a result of failing to use subject-auxiliary inversion.

(iii) Responding to yes-no questions in Japanese

No. 1

Jason, kazoku no shashin motte iru?

Jason, do you have a picture of your family?

Ee, arimasu.

Yes, I do.

(Miura & McGloin 2005: 71)

No. 2

Biiru wa nomanai n desu ka

You don't drink beer?

Iie, yoku nomimasu yo.

No (your assumption is wrong), I drink it often.

(Storm 2003: 94)

These examples show the use of *iie and ee* as responses to yes-no questions. Indeed, *hai/ee* and *iie/iya* perform largely the same role as *yes* and *no* do (Iwasaki 2002). We can see from Jason's response that, in contrast to English, the object and subject are missing and a main lexical verb is used (arimasu=have). Another way in which Japanese differs from English is revealed in No. 2. In response to a negative question *iie* (*no*) is uttered to indicate that the supposition is incorrect. In English, the response would be *yes* to express *yes, I do drink beer* (Barker 2010: 251). JLE often find using ellipsis difficult when they are responding to yes- no questions. There is a tendency to reply with the main verb intact; e.g. *yes, I like* (Barker 2010: 144) as they would in Japanese. Most JLE follow the Japanese rule of answering negative questions. Questions such as *Don't you like fish?* often brings a response of *no, I do* or *yes, I don't*. This appears to be only a small problem, but can impede communication especially when the interlocutor is conversant with the proper English utterances, and perhaps not aware of the Japanese rule.

(iv) Assertive forms

In No. 2 the negative question form is used in a conducive manner, much the same as in English. Assertive forms are generally less complex though, indicated here by placing *n* immediately following the main verb.

Negative questions are interesting because although, as No. 2 illustrates, they have a conducive function in Japanese, just as they do in English, many of our JLE have difficulty using them in the target language. Barker (2010) gives a good example of this; *I was really frightened when I fell in the water.—Can you swim?* (p. 170). The best options being either *can't you swim?* or *you can't swim?* to presuppose a negative answer. It can be assumed that for JLE, the main issue concerning assertive forms is not errors caused by transference, but rather *avoidance*, which is the avoidance of particular forms in conversation due to lack of confidence in how to use them (Ellis 2008: 357). As one of the authors found out recently, while instructing a group of JLE on the difference between *would you like something to drink?* and *would you like anything to drink?* (*something* presupposing a positive answer, whereas *anything* has a neutral polarity, Quirk et al. 1985: 88), they could all understand the concept but did not feel confident in using the structures.

There are some noticeable differences in the structures of English and Japanese, both generally and specifically related to the formation of yes no questions. It is possible that the issue of transference is exacerbated for JLE. Firstly, it might be exacerbated by the grammar-translation method of teaching that still dominates formal English education, and which encourages comparing and contrasting L1 and the target language. It might also be exacerbated by the fact

the Japanese tend to view the Japanese language as very different from all other languages (Shibatani 1987: 741), which can sometimes lead to greater levels of transference (Kellerman 1977). Many Japanese learners of English may be influenced by what Jared Taylor has referred to as the painfully unique awareness of how much their customs differ from those of other countries "and seem to think of them as inevitable extensions of physical or psychological differences" (Taylor, 1983: 31). They seem to think of English therefore as an impenetrable mystery which can only be made sense within the familiar Japanese framework. Our challenge as teachers is to find effective methods to overcome these problems of transference.

Teaching yes-no questions

We have seen in this paper that yes-no questions are varied in form and function, it is therefore necessary for course designers and teachers to divide them into easily teachable areas. One way of doing this is to use topics or situations (e.g. global warming, going shopping) or to use notions and functions (e.g. the future, expressing obligation) (Ur 1999). The main advantage of this is that form can be taught within a context and allow learners to connect the form with its function(s).

Improving Form

In general, JLE are aware of the correct forms of yes-no questions and their responses. This is no doubt a result of their formal junior high school study of English (most people in Japan study English for 3–6years in the formal school system). Problems arise though when learners come to use yes-no questions verbally.

The basic skills required for forming inverted yes-no questions are to find the correct structure quickly and accurately, then be able to answer with the correct elliptical form, again quickly and accurately. There are a number of activities that can aid learners to do this. Guessing games are particularly useful as they can be easily adapted to meet classes' specific needs. For example, focus could be on one grammatical structure (e.g. a miming activity to practise the present continuous; *are you swimming?- no, I'm, not*). The teacher can also practise a number of structures at one time (guess the object- *is it in the classroom? Can we eat it? Do you use it every day?*) (Ur 1988: 158). These are effective for improving learners' ability to form and respond to inverted yes-no questions.

Improving function

Matching form and function requires the reading of clues from context to understand the meaning of an utterance (Thornbury 1999: 6). Teachers should aid learners in doing this.

The use of *drama* (Maley & Duff 1978) in the classroom can be effective for introducing situations where learners can use the functions mentioned in this paper. By introducing the language (assertive forms, requests etc.) through the context of *real* situations, the learners can be shown the nuances of each form's function.

Short focused conversation activities can give learners the chance to match expressions with the context of situations. For example, one learner can mime a situation (e.g. drinking coffee and then spitting it out), their partner then chooses the correct expression to respond with (from, for example, a) *do you like coffee?* Or b) *don't you like coffee?*). This can be made more challenging by having learners react to situations without being given the expressions to choose from. Through repetition of such activities, learners can develop a better understanding of how and when to use these functions and also develop their intonation skills.

Conclusion

The various forms and functions of yes-no questions can be a source of confusion and a barrier to effective communication for JLE. However, with well planned and imaginative

instruction, this situation can be transformed so learners can effectively utilize yes-no question forms as communication tools. The onus is on us teachers to recognize the fact that learning a new language is far different from learning a mother tongue. Learners come with a whole lot of baggage from the L1 they have learned naturally, and this interferes, often detrimentally, with their learning processes. Mental exercises like inversion, which native and near-native users of English take for granted, may be a nightmare for learners like JLEs whose mother tongue forms questions in a different and simpler way.

Teachers should perhaps look to introduce the use of such structures as negative questions and assertive forms at an earlier stage in a learner's development to allow more time to master their usage. Through both explicit teaching and repeated practice, both the fundamental interlanguage differences and the dangers of miscommunication must also be pointed out.

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