

## AN INTRODUCTION TO DATA-DRIVEN LEARNING

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### Abstract

This paper studies the rationale for allowing Data-driven learning (DDL) more prominence in the EFL classroom. After covering some pertinent issues and developments in the field of pedagogic grammar (PG), the case for DDL will be discussed. The last part of this paper features uses of data-driven learning with Japanese university students, with special consideration given to their reactions to this new form of grammar learning.

### Introduction

During the mid 1990's, the English language teaching (ELT) profession underwent a major paradigm shift away from the focus on communication, and instead began to reconsider the role that form and structure has in educating language learners. This process started as far back as the mid 1980's (Swan 1985), when some began to question many aspects of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT).

One difficulty has been in the inability to define exactly what we mean by "communicative language teaching." Jennings and Doyle (1996) state that CLT as an approach has often become the platform for "... unprincipled eclecticism, varying from teacher to teacher" (p. 169). Shortall (1996:31) points out that the failure to clarify CLT has allowed for a wide range of approaches (PPP/Task-based Learning, Notional-Functional, Silent Way, etc.) to be called "communicative." He also reports that popular applications of many of these approaches have tended to reduce or reject the explicit teaching of grammar. Skehan states that this trend in CLT to focus on verbal fluency over formal accuracy "... runs the risk of learners becoming confined to the strategic solutions they develop, without sufficient focus for structural change or accuracy" (1996:30). Batstone also warns that such an unbalanced approach to language teaching can lead to the early fossilization of the learners' language skills (1995:229).

The result has been a renewed interest on the part of many language teachers in Pedagogic Grammar (PG). Yamamoto-Wilson (1997) writes:

Is it really necessary to reject a grammatical approach in order to espouse a communicative one? Isn't there a need for a more rounded approach, giving students a grounding in language structure at the same time as developing their communicative competence? (p. 6).

Yamamoto-Wilson voices the concern that many language teachers have expressed, that is it necessary to consider correcting the imbalance between fluency and accuracy caused by the ELT community's love affair with CLT. However, calls for an increased focus on grammatical form should not be misinterpreted as a return to the old days of structural grammars, nor as a return to a grammar-translation approach. What is currently being considered in PG has been motivated by the exciting developments in the field of corpus linguistics over the past several years.

This paper begins by tackling some misgivings that language teachers and learners have when thinking about the subject of grammar, and then moves on to discuss some recent issues in Pedagogic Grammar. Special attention will then be given to one practical application of PG, which is known as Data-Driven Learning (DDL). The final part of this paper discusses an attempt to use DDL in limited circumstances with a class of beginning Japanese English language learners.

## **The Grammar Stigma**

Even today, not all teachers and students would instantly welcome a resurgence of pedagogic grammar in TEFL. Kerr (1993) found in his survey of 100 teacher trainees that attitudes toward grammar ranged from viewing it as an abstract set of rules, to expressing feelings of terror. Similar sentiments are found in Chalker (1994), who notes that many classroom teachers equate grammar with the acquisition of some set of rules — rules that are at times contradictory and at other times confusing. In Japan, a survey of the preferences of 572 English language learners showed that grammar was ranked as the least favorable item for study in a language lesson. They opted for conversation classes with native speakers who avoided grammatical explanations in favor of speaking “practical English” (Ryan 1996:119).

This implies that grammar as a concept means different things to different people. The apparent aversion to grammar that many teachers and students feel relates to the negative impact of past approaches to teaching the subject. For teachers who speak English as their first language, grammar is often connected to Structuralist Grammars, while in Japan and many other countries, it relates to the Grammar Translation approach (GT).

Most native English speakers were required to study structural grammar systems developed by Americans in the 1930's (Chalker 1994, Shortall 1996). Grammarians at this time attempted to discover the rules governing the English language through scientific procedures. Understanding the systems they developed involved memorizing a complex system of rules and the diagramming of sentences. Tonkyn (1994) relates how the influence of structural grammar went through a steady decline by the late 1960's. Linguists and educators alike disagreed on the best way to teach grammar, and years of research advised against the teaching of structuralist grammars either to native speakers or second language learners (DeBoer 1959, Braddock et al. 1963, Elley et al. 1976, Hillocks 1986, Hillocks and Smith 1991).

In Japan, grammar teaching is associated with Grammar Translation (GT). Introduced to Japan in the late 1800's, GT has survived many attempts to replace it with modern pedagogic methods. Although the Ministry of Education is attempting to change this practice, Grammar-Translation remains the principal method of language instruction to this day by Japanese English teachers (Doyle, 1994, Law, 1995, Hadley, 1997). A peculiar feature in the ideology used to justify GT in Japan is the popular notion that native speakers of English are unable to teach grammar. Not only do most native English-speaking teachers lack the skills necessary to lecture in Japanese on grammatical points, it is commonly thought that native English speakers use the language without an explicit knowledge of the rules that govern them. In an odd twist of fate, native English teachers in Japan are occasionally discouraged from teaching aspects of their own language — aspects thought to be better understood by those who sometimes speak and write English with limited proficiency (Wada and Cominos, 1995). However, recent developments in PG differ significantly from these outmoded forms of language learning. Innovative pedagogic grammars, such as Data-driven learning (DDL) are suggesting that grammar can once again be a relevant and engaging resource for second language learners.

## **Pedagogic Grammar: A Definition**

A common sense definition for PG would probably be construed as “grammar for teaching.” In actuality many definitions have been introduced for pedagogic grammar. For example, Chalker’s (1994) definition (which is built upon the work of Corder, 1975, Greenbaum, 1987 and Dirven, 1990) defines pedagogic grammar as a systematic study of the language which:

- can be for reference or for course work;
- could be comprehensive but will probably be more modest in its aims;
- will draw attention to rules, thus probably combining prescription with description;
- will help foreigners to learn a language and/or help mother-tongue speakers to understand their own language;
- can be either for learners or for teachers (p. 34).

My definition builds upon, but differs significantly from that of Chalker’s. I propose that PG is a modest reference which can be used for course work, which principally draws attention to language patterns. It can be used by teachers, native speakers and second language learners to gain insight into and better utilize the target language.

This definition suggests that grammar involves “doing” and “autonomous discovery” much more than “being told about.” Chalker’s definition, as with many others, still assumes that grammar is a product found in a book of rules or a set of reference materials. However, there are questions about whether or not such a rigid view can do justice to the complexity of the language.

## **Product and Process Approaches to Teaching Grammar**

Much of this section is indebted to the work of Rob Batstone (1994, 1995), who has written extensively on product and process approaches to teaching grammar. The distinction between the two is frequently discussed when PG is considered as a second language learning resource. Product approaches are those that carefully present specific aspects of the language for the students. Process approaches encourage creativity and self-discovery by students as they experiment with the language. Structuralist grammars and GT are extreme examples of a product approach, while Task-Based and CLT approaches

originate from process view of grammar learning. These pedagogic points of departure are frequently pitted against each other in the literature, but Batstone (1994:71) rightly points out that, except for the extreme versions of product and process approaches, the conservative application of either view has certain advantages.

### **Strengths and Weaknesses of a Product Approach**

Batstone (1995) contends that a moderate product approach provides a clear framework in which to study. It encourages students to notice various structures in the target language, and isolate these items to maximize their use. This gives some learners “. . . a strong sense of position and direction, and this in itself can generate a much needed feeling of security and purpose which can have a motivating effect” (p. 226).

Few could disagree with these observations, but can we be certain that the structures and items isolated for the learners are in fact adequate and authentic? Lewis (1994) best summarizes the main reasons why many see the product approach to pedagogic grammar as basically flawed:

- Much of the grammar rules that are taught are inaccurate or plain wrong.
- The rules which are taught are frequently incomprehensible to the students who are taught them.
- Failure to understand abstract meta-language and rules produces unnecessary failure.
- There is no research evidence that explicit knowledge of grammar aids acquisition of the grammatical system.
- Most tellingly, grammar is not the basis of language acquisition, and the balance of linguistic research clearly invalidates any view to the contrary (p. 133).

What we normally see in a product approach are lopsided, half-true descriptions of only the simplest parts of language “fragments.” Teaching grammar as a product simply cannot do justice to the complexity of the target language. They are the products of, as Johns (1994) puts it, “. . . intuition-based ‘armchair’ linguistics — myths and distortions that are too easily perpetuated from one generation to another of dictionaries, grammars and coursebooks” (p. 30). What is more, it is not certain that learners learn by mastering one grammatical item before moving onto the next.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of a Process Approach

Nunan's task-based textbook series, *Atlas* (Heinle and Heinle, 1995) is typical of a process approach to PG:

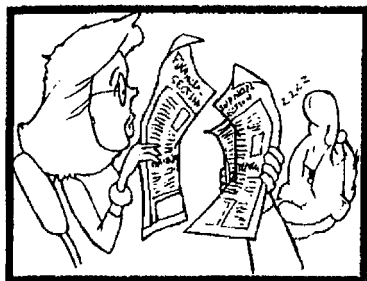
The grammar tasks are also designed to involve the learners in actively thinking how English works. Learners are not given grammar rules to memorize and apply; they are invited instead to use the examples and models in the material to recognize language patterns, and work out the language rules for themselves

(p. xxiii).

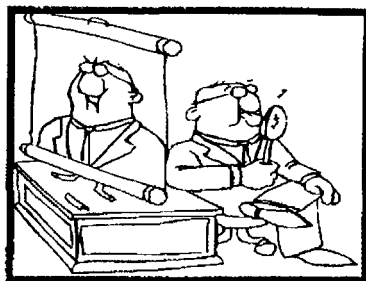
The advantage to this approach is that it encourages students to take responsibility for their language learning, with the teacher in the role of a facilitator. Learners begin to recognize language patterns for themselves, and then to experiment with the language. Tasks are presented to help students begin speaking and writing the language as soon as possible. Some of the main aims in a process approach, therefore, are a focus on meaning, increased fluency in spoken and written discourse, as well as a heightened awareness of the lexicalized "chunks" of language which can facilitate communication (Widdowson 1989). A process approach views language acquisition as organic in nature, meaning that mastery of the target language begins with imperfect use of a number of skills. These skills appear to improve slowly with increased use, discovery and the indirect guidance of the teacher (Long, 1988, quoted in Skehan, 1995).

Nevertheless, we saw in the beginning of this paper that many researchers now feel that too much of a focus upon meaning will bring early gains in the language learners' ability to "get their ideas across," but over time, many fail to move to a higher level of proficiency. To illustrate this point, consider the following task (see Figure One), which is a common activity used in many Japanese *eikaiwa* (English Conversation) classes.

These two pictures tell the story of what Mr. Bloggs does everyday.  
Tell the story to your partner.



*In the Morning*



*In the Afternoon*

**Figure 1: Typical Story-Telling Task**  
(Pictures from Corel, Inc. 1996. The task is mine)

In a typical class, the teacher might warm up by asking the students to brainstorm about their daily routines. After filling out a worksheet reviewing certain lexical items deemed important by the teacher, the learners would then receive a card containing the information in Figure One, and be encouraged to tell their partner the story of Mr. Bloggs without showing his or her partner the card. The following is the sort of discourse commonly heard in a class of intermediate Japanese students who have been studying English for more than ten years. The Japanese interjections are written in italics with translations in parentheses:

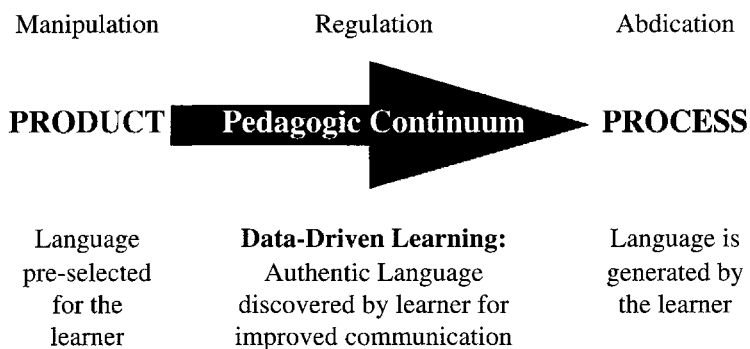
*Eto ne* (Erm, Right)...He get up in morning...He...he...read...reads the newspaper but...*ano...nandake...Aa! Wakatta!* (erm...what was that...Oh yeah!) He sit with his wife, but he very tired, so he sleep and holding the newspaper. *Ano...*(erm) So he go to work, but he is not working. He...*ano...*(erm) he put picture on his desk and he eating a candy. I think he is a lazy man.

Understanding what the student was talking about would be difficult if we did not have the pictures in front of us. Quite often with monolingual classes in Japan, students quickly abandon speaking in English to speak in their native language in order to clarify what they are talking about in the task.

## Data-driven Learning: Striking the Balance Between Product and Process Approaches

What is currently being contemplated in PG is some middle ground between the product and process approaches to teaching grammar. Batstone (1994:99) feels that most attempts to bridge this “critical gap” often end with a focus on product teaching, with no real movement toward process work. One possible way to bridge this gap might be found in Data-Driven Learning (DDL).

Johns (1991a) writes that the “. . . language-learner is also, essentially, a research worker whose learning needs to be driven by access to linguistic data — hence the term ‘data-driven learning’ (DDL) to describe the approach” (p. 2). Data-driven learning studies vast databases of English text (corpora) with software programs called concordancers, which isolate common patterns in authentic language samples. It is essentially a new form of grammatical consciousness-raising (Rutherford, 1987) that attempts to move our learners to move along the pedagogic continuum from product to process (see Figure Two). While still very much a new methodology, DDL appears to utilize the strengths of both product and process approaches to teaching grammar successfully.



**Figure 2: A Pedagogic Continuum from Product to Process Grammar Learning Through DDL.**  
Adapted from Batstone (1995).

DDL draws from process teaching in that it sees grammar as a flexible system of recurring and interrelated prototypes rather than a static set of rules. Leech (1994) calls this a “fuzzy” view of grammar that draws from the Prototype Theory in cognitive psychology (cf. Rosch, 1975) and is closely related to the Schema Theory (Cook, 1997). The Prototype Theory states that humans recognize reality in abstract types. For example, the prototypical dog for an American might be a brown four-legged canine with short hair, rope-like tale, long nose and standing about 50 centimeters in height. Of course, dogs vary widely from this norm, yet we still recognize them as dogs because the prototype allows for variety in the identification process. Langacker (1991) suggests that the prototype theory can be applied to PG. He feels that grammatical groupings are prototypical in nature, and should not be seen as lists of inflexible rules.

This view of the grammar system is, according to Leech (1994:19-20) “organic” in nature, not mechanistic. A DDL approach suggests that grammar learning should consist largely of consciousness raising activities rather than the teaching of rules. Consciousness raising (CR) is defined by Rutherford and Smith (1988) as “. . . the deliberate attempt to draw the learner’s attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language” (p. 107). This is why in DDL learners are not seen simply as recipients of knowledge, but as researchers studying the regularity of the language. Teachers help the learners’ research without knowing in advance what patterns they will discover. A DDL approach expects learners to get a “feel” for the language by personally experiencing a focused study of the target language’s organic consistencies (Chalker 1994, Johns 1991).

While the learner’s own discovery of grammar is central to DDL, the approach also draws from product teaching in that it provides authentic language material for study. A main shortcoming of earlier product approaches was that they used idealized and often contrived sentences to teach the language. Data-driven learning brings to the class abundant examples of authentic language samples that can be studied and exploited in many ways. Supporters of DDL are writing an increasing amount of material showing how data from corpora and concordancers can be used in the classroom (Tribble 1996, Kettemann 1995, Johns 1994, Tribble and Jones 1990).

## How Data-Driven Learning Works

Data-driven learning is very much a “research-then-theory” method of studying grammar. Language learners start with a question, and then come to their conclusions after analyzing the corpora with a concordancer program. “What the concordancer does,” according to Tribble (1990:11), “is make the invisible visible.” Concordancers isolate frequent patterns in the target language. Using a format called keyword-in-context (KWIC), language learners can easily focus on the main item of study, which will be situated in the center of the page. Often during the process of study, learners will become aware of other language items that collocate with the item they are researching (see Figure Three).

of the state’s most popular and **powerful** public officials, House Speaker Tom perhaps the most consistent and **powerful** focus for international criticism. I, ITV is bringing out its most **powerful** weapon yet to schedule against east n hour. And now two of the most **powerful** men in in land are relying on him igula’s first steps as the most **powerful** man in the civilised world were pos I had under-estimated that most **powerful** breed of writer # the author of a b States and Europe. I If the most **powerful** factors governing the status of ref alry of all cavalries, the most **powerful** and skilled in the history of warfa rks) promises to prove the most **powerful** event of the season. and one of South Africa’s most **powerful** right-wing figures.

**Figure 3: Example of Kwic citations showing collocations with the word *powerful* (Collins COBUILD, 1995).**

One example of DDL’s potential as a pedagogic resource will suffice. In Japan, language learners still memorize sentences such as “The food was eaten by me.” However, such a sentence would strike most native speakers as odd. Instead of trying to explain to learners why it is odd simply from insight, we can direct our students to look at tangible examples from the corpus. Using a corpora/concordancer package (Collins COBUILD English Collocations, 1995), they find that “eaten” does in fact collocate most commonly with the word “food.” The learners are then provided with the following samples taken from COBUILD’s Bank of English (see Figure Four). They may then notice how the authentic language samples differ from their usage of the word “eaten.”

ch these types of **food** should be **eaten**. For most of us it means: eating ple  
 a wide selection of **food** will be **eaten**. Prepared Softbill **food** is a good st  
 er **foods** and any **food** that can be **eaten** seductively are in! Accomplished fl  
 e an excellent **food** and should be **eaten** in plentiful quantities. Now to mak  
 est with an extract of a commonly **eaten food**, we are likely to provoke a pos  
 ng the amount and variety of **food eaten**. Problems could include failure to e  
 on to the amount and type of **food eaten**, the frequency of meals may be an im  
 h its body size, whereas the **food eaten** by land mammals was not rich enough.  
 owing: Reduce the amount of **food eaten**, but not by sacrificing nutritious f  
 ds. No charge except for the **food eaten**. Big fuss made of birthday child. Bu  
 Another reason why hot **food** gets **eaten** in hot countries is that chillies an  
 e, or almost everyone, would have **eaten** contaminated **food**. At least that's h  
 he name of Scottish **food** - I have **eaten** in places where everything was rolle  
 y contain any **food** you might have **eaten** as a snack rather that a proper meal  
 ed by overeating it. If a **food** is **eaten** in any form once in three days, or m  
 . If every time a certain **food** is **eaten** the rash becomes worse, or there is  
 It was two days since we had last **eaten**, although **food** had been promised. Af  
 e folic acid. **food**, substances **eaten** or drunk or administered parenterall  
 es happens when the mother hasn't **eaten** proper **food** - I've had a survey don

Figure 4: Sample of *eaten* as it collocates with *food*.  
 (CollinsCOBUILD 1995).

Afterwards the learners can be encouraged to complete writing and/or speaking tasks based upon this new linguistic knowledge. In this way, the teacher moves from preselecting and manipulating the text for the learners through tasks, to regulating their language, to an ultimate abdication in which they are allowed to generate their own language. When they come to a point where they have new questions, the research process will start all again (see again Figure Two).

### Where to get Corpora and Concordancers

Obviously most learners will not have access to a computer that contains a corpus or concordancer software, so it will usually be up to the teacher to do the primary data gathering. The first thing a teacher will need is a general corpus. The largest general corpora can be found in COBUILD Project and the British National Corpus (BNC) in the United Kingdom. Both are the repositories of hundreds of millions of words taken from books, radio and

TV broadcasts, newspapers and spoken English (both formal and informal). However, this data is only available to a few researchers. Language teachers currently must build their own corpus or purchase a corpora package available on CD ROM.

Building one's own corpus has certain advantages. In order to do this, language teachers will need a computer, OCR scanning software, and one of the many concordancing software packages out on the market. For example, for the IBM there is Longman's MINI-CONCORDANCER (Tribble, 1996), and MICROCONCORD from Oxford University Press (Murison-Bowie, 1993). FreeText Browser, written by Mark Zimmerman, and Conc. 1.70 from the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Dallas, are available as freeware on the Internet for Mac users. Detailed information about these programs can be found in Ball (1996).

Armed with an OCR scanner and one of these programs, a teacher can build his or her own corpus, store it in a home computer, and use the data according to the needs of the learners. Especially for teachers and students working with a specific genre of writing, such as scientific papers, the DDL approach can effectively:

...cut out the middleman as far as possible and to give the learner direct access to the data, the underlying assumption being that effective language learning is a form of linguistic research, and that the concordance printout offers a unique way of stimulating inductive learning strategies — in particular the strategies of perceiving similarities and differences of hypothesis formation and testing (Johns, 1991b:30).

Unfortunately in many countries, schools do not have the money to purchase the software or equipment needed for such an enterprise. For example, most Japanese EFL departments will not gamble on a new teaching method unless they are certain of success. Even if the equipment is available, often teachers do not have the time necessary to scan hundreds of pages of text in their computers.

Most teachers and learners must look for other alternatives in order to begin using DDL in their classrooms. If they have access to a personal computer, Oxford University Press produces several CD ROMs that can be used with the MICROCONCORD package (Tribble 1996). The COBUILD

dictionary and Collocation Database have also come out on CD ROM (HarperCollins 1995). These come with concordancer software built into a large and general database. This is handy for busy teachers who are interested in DDL, but need an instant, well-rounded corpus with which to work. Many teachers who work overseas may not have a PC or Mac, so shorter print versions in the form of resource books which use the KWIC format have also been developed by HarperCollins. This means that DDL can be used by teachers and students even in technologically-disadvantaged environments.

### **But Can DDL Work with Beginners?**

The main argument against the DDL approach is that it is just too difficult for most students (Willis, Shortall and Johns 1995:67). Johns (1991a) reports that teachers often lack confidence in their learners' ability to handle DDL:

Talking about the DDL approach with other language teachers I am sometimes reproached that while this way of language-teaching by stimulating student questions and by doing linguistic research in the classroom on a cooperative basis may be very well for students as intelligent, sophisticated, and well-motivated as ours at Birmingham University, it would not work with students as unintelligent, unsophisticated and poorly-motivated as theirs  
(p. 12).

Johns teaches postgraduate overseas exchange students. Most EFL teachers work with learners who are at a more basic level of language proficiency. Would DDL work with beginners studying in their native country? Would they find DDL interesting?

When discussing this prospect with my colleagues in Japan, they assured me that the answer was a definite "no." Such an experiment, they said, was doomed to failure. I was reminded that native English-speaking teachers could not teach grammar. And because there is a wealth of "angst literature" that has been written by expatriate teachers depicting the teaching experience in Japan as overwhelmingly discouraging (cf. Cohen 1995, Brown 1993), it was with hesitation that I decided to try using DDL with my students.

I chose a group of beginners and opted for a workbook instead of a computer with concordancer software. I felt this ultimately would represent the true conditions in which many expatriate language teachers work. All

these moves seemed to be necessary risks to take in order to find out *Concordance Samplers 2: Phrasal Verbs. Helping Learners with Real English*, by Malcolm Goodale (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995. Pp. 64. ISBN 0-00-370939-6), was tested for one month. The book is part of a series of pedagogic grammars that include the Collins COBUILD Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs and the COBUILD Phrasal Verbs Workbook. It contains photocopiable activities that uses the KWIC format, and focuses on the ten most common phrasal verbs and sixteen most commonly-used particles in English. The main activities consisted of a series of consciousness-raising activities and Identify-Classify-Generalise techniques (Johns, 1991a:4). *Concordance Samplers* also contains a photocopiable needs test that identifies the verbs and particles with which the learners are having problems. Students can then refer to the section that explains common uses of the particles. There are also forty-five pages of concordance samples taken from unedited authentic materials in the Bank of English. Two other sections in the book include fill-in-the gap and referencing activities where students must interact with the data in the concordance.

While stated to be for intermediate students, *Concordance Samplers 2* seemed better suited for students in European countries, whose educational systems already stress authentic exposure to English. My fear was that *Concordance Samplers 2* might be too difficult for most Japanese “intermediate” students, and thought it should only be attempted with very motivated and advanced students.

## **Subjects**

The class chosen for the project consisted of a group of first year students from the Economics Department at Niigata University, a national university on the Northwest coast of the main Japanese island of Honshu. The teaching conditions in this class, both environmental and attitudinal, are typical for a Japanese university (cf. Wadden, 1993). Classes are virtually unheated, unairconditioned rooms with no access to computers or any but the most basic of audiovisual equipment (e.g., a cassette recorder). For most Japanese university students, this is the last English class they will ever take. The class in this study consisted of twenty-five students, thirteen males and twelve

females. They met ninety minutes per week on Fridays, from 10:30 a.m. to noon. Since students are allowed by the university to be absent up to 33% of the total classes (and much more excused absences for club activities), class attendance is often sporadic. This sample also included two exchange students from Malaysia, one male and one female, both of which were highly-motivated. Except the two Malaysian students, the written and spoken communicative ability of the class was roughly at the level of false beginners.

### Attitudes toward Grammar

Before introducing the DDL approach, I administered a small survey to understand this group's attitudes toward grammar better. Twenty students participated in the survey (five students were absent). The questions were written in both English and Japanese to assure full understanding. They were asked to express their feelings without reservation, and were assured that the survey was not a test.

1. I think studying grammar will help improve my English ability.

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	4	20%
Somewhat Agree	11	55%
NoOpinion	0	0%
Somewhat Disagree	5	25%
Disagree	0	0%

2. I think that studying grammar is interesting.

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	0	0%
Somewhat Agree	7	35%
No Opinion	1	5%
Somewhat Disagree	9	45%
Disagree	3	15%

3. I think that native English speakers are able to teach grammar.

	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	1	5%
Somewhat Agree	7	35%
No Opinion	6	30%
Somewhat Disagree	4	20%
Disagree	2	10%

4. When you think about grammar, what is the first word that comes to your mind?

	Frequency	Percentage
Difficult	11	55%
Examinations	3	15%
Preset Rules	1	5%
You Can Read Foreign Books	1	5%
Present Tense,	1	5%
Past Tense	1	5%
Foundational	1	5%
Main Thing For Understanding L2	1	5%
No Matter How ... (?)	1	5%

**Table 1: Student Attitudes Regarding Grammar Before Starting DDL. 20 Surveys Tabulated.**

While most of the class was decidedly negative in their attitudes toward grammar, a significant number (35%) of the class found grammar study (which meant for them Grammar-Translation study) to be somewhat interesting (see Table One). This sample also seemed to believe that the mastery of grammar, while difficult, would improve their language skills. This sample also leaned

toward allowing a native English teacher to teach grammar. The attitudes expressed in this group were not as extreme as I had been led to believe by my colleagues.

### **DDL in the Classroom**

Encouraged by the results of the survey, I spent most of a class session introducing the students to the ideas of DDL by using simple English and humorous pictures on handouts. The class also received the photocopyable materials and activities found in *Concordance Samplers 2*. In the space of a month, we did the needs test, and several general exercises. At first, the students were terrified at seeing pages full of English words. Many scrambled furtively for their dictionaries. While allowing and encouraging the use of dictionaries, I also urged the students to focus upon the patterns in the middle of the page, not to translate every word they didn't understand.

I walked around the class and worked with students as they studied the concordance materials and did the exercises. All the students, even the ones who normally seemed least motivated were working intently on the activities. This observed interest in DDL was encouraging — especially since my colleagues warned that it would be a pedagogic disaster.

### **Response to DDL**

After one month, I administered another survey to find out what the students thought about this form of pedagogic grammar. As before, I urged students to express their true feelings regarding the month's study. The survey was again written in English and Japanese to ease understanding. Most students wrote their answers in Japanese. As Table Two shows, the sample did feel that DDL could help in improving their English ability. They found this approach more interesting than traditional GT methods of learning. The findings also seem to suggest more confidence that a native English speaker can teach this form of pedagogic grammar.

1. I think that studying grammar as we have for the last month will help improve my English.

	F	%
Agree	2	10%
Somewhat Agree	6	29%
No Opinion	7	33%
Somewhat Disagree	5	24%
Disagree	1	5%

2. I think that studying grammar as we have for the last month is interesting.

	F	%
Agree	2	10%
Somewhat Agree	9	29%
No Opinion	2	33%
Somewhat Disagree	7	24%
Disagree	1	5%

3. I think that native English speakers are able to teach grammar as we have studied for the past month

	F	%
Agree	3	14%
Somewhat Agree	7	33%
No Opinion	8	38%
Somewhat Disagree	3	14%
Disagree	0	0%

4. When you think about the way we have studied grammar for the past month, what is the first word that comes to your mind?

	F	%
Surprisingly Interesting	3	14%
Not Sure What This Is	3	14%

Difficult & Complicated	3	14%
Better Than Old Grammar	2	10%
Fun & Interesting	2	10%
Lots Of Work	1	5%
Improving	1	5%
Both Easy And Difficult	1	5%
Is This Grammar Or Idioms?	1	5%

5. What do you think is the main strength of this approach?

	F	%
Lots Of Real Examples	5	23%
Teaches True English	3	14%
Enjoyable	3	14%
No Study Of Grammar Rules	2	10%
Can Get The Feel Of L2	2	10%
We Can Learn Idioms	2	10%
Have To Think By Myself	1	5%
Easy To Catch On/Work With	1	5%
Helps To Improve Grammar	1	5%

6. What do you think is the main weakness of this approach?

	F	%
Difficult	4	19%
Incoherent	3	14%
Too Many Examples	3	14%
Better For Native Speakers	1	5%
Activities Are Very	1	5%
Complex	1	5%
Not Sure What This Really Was	1	5%
Not Confident About Answers	1	5%
Was This Grammar Or Idioms?	1	5%
Too Much Writing: Boring	1	5%

**Table 2: Student attitudes towards Data-driven Learning after One Month**

Questions four through six were open-ended, so all the data could not be presented here. We can see from question four that the subjects found DDL interesting, but the newness of the approach was confusing for some. Others found it complicated or difficult. Nevertheless, in the opinion of this group, the main strength of this approach was the exposure to examples of “real” English (as opposed to the English in textbooks). Some found it enjoyable while others mentioned getting a “feel” for the language. This may mean that consciousness-raising was taking place for several in this sample.

These results seem to imply that authentic exposure and consciousness-raising were received positively by this sample. This was especially encouraging for me, since I knew this class to be one that avoided taking risks in language learning. Comments to question five included: “I was able to put two things together that I already knew to learn something new. Thank you for teaching me this new type of grammar”; “It help(s) me to improve any grammar in a very interesting way that I’ve never did before”; and “Even people who don’t like English might like to try doing this.”

However, this sample also found DDL to be overwhelming at times. “Difficult” was the most commonly-stated weakness in question six. Many also found the concordance style of only presenting part of the sentences disturbing. Many felt this made the presentation of the phrasal verbs incoherent. Not being able to read the entire sentence made understanding the context of the verbs and particles difficult. Some criticisms were: “The sentences are incomplete, so they are incoherent”; “There are so many English sentences . . . its overwhelming”; and “It’s a little difficult to do because it is so new. Also, you need to understand the meaning of the words before you can really do this.”

### **Implications for Teaching**

It is idealistic to expect that any group of students can suddenly change their minds about everything they have learned about grammar and come over to a DDL approach in the space of only one month. It was partly due to this short period of exposure that I did not test them on specific items to see how much they may have learned. Yet overall, the attitudes toward DDL tended to be more positive than negative. In class the students were observed as challenged, motivated and on task. Although effort is not rewarded in

the Japanese university system, (classes are essentially on a pass-fail system), these students worked hard to complete the tasks. As experienced classroom teachers know, students who are interested in a subject and engaged with the tasks often have a better chance of learning.

If DDL could be given equally-positive exposure in Japan and other pedagogically-conservative countries, it could eventually have extensive effects on our roles as teachers and our classroom teaching materials. I found more time to go around the class quietly and help each student according to his or her personal needs. Several classroom experiences left me convinced that teachers could indeed serve in the role of research organizer, and that the students had the potential of becoming better linguistic researchers than the teacher (Johns, 1991a).

For example, once a student asked me about a certain frequency of collocations with a phrasal verb. Before I could stop myself, I gave a student a ridiculous rule that I felt at the time would explain the situation. The student looked at me for a moment, blinking in a cool, unimpressed manner. She then went on to produce evidence from the concordancer about why my rule was unsound! Embarrassed but happy that the student made this observation, I congratulated her on her discovery and apologized for my blunder. This experience impressed upon me the potential of data-driven learning more than anything else.

A DDL approach suggests a move away from unnatural, “simplified” textbook English, and allow for a greater use of authentic materials. Data-driven learning can never replace the experience and intuition of teacher, but an informed use of the method will help many to reflect up and reconsider the way grammar is traditionally taught in many language classes across the world. However, we must find ways to make DDL more visually-palatable for students who are accustomed to colorful, professionally-packaged textbooks. We must also find more ways to help students feel comfortable with the KWIC display method.

Provided the students understand the context in which the materials are used even beginners can work with unedited materials in a limited way. Despite the difficulties with vocabulary, this sample found that working with real English was more motivating, but perhaps the words to be emphasized in the concordancer could be highlighted with different colors.

To combat the criticism some students had about DDL being incoherent, a set of concordance lines for “impression” could be displayed, followed by complete sentence examples for comprehension. It might also be helpful, when designing DDL-based materials for beginning students, to present fewer examples so as not to overload and perhaps demotivate some students. Another option would be for the development of a beginner’s corpus that is more limited to the most frequent lexical forms.

## Conclusion

More research will be necessary to determine if a DDL approach actually facilitates language learning after the initial stage of consciousness-raising. If it could be shown that the DDL approach is not only engaging, but also an effective form of language learning, it would be a major step toward establishing it in ESL/EFL classrooms. While I have no hard evidence to support my claim, I feel that many learners in this study did learn something. At least one student asked for information for ordering other COBUILD materials for further private study. Others in class also seemed interested in following through with this method outside class. The fact that students in a Japanese university environment show interest in studying samples of authentic language *outside class* leads me to believe that DDL can work beginning EFL students, even for those in less-than-ideal teaching conditions. It is hoped the results of this study will encourage others to experiment with data-driven learning in their classrooms, either as a main emphasis or alongside a standard classroom text.

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