

Teaching Noun Clauses and Adverbial Clauses Using the *if*- or *when*-Clause

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Japanese learners of English are said to be relatively familiar with grammar. This is because entrance examinations to universities require a high level of grammatical knowledge. However, there are some typical grammatical errors which the learners continue to make. One of these errors is confusion of the noun clause and the adverbial clause, both of which use the same subordinate conjunction, *if* or *when*. This article attempts to present a rationale for an inductive way of teaching noun clauses and adverbial clauses using subordinate conjunctions “*if*” and “*when*” in a Japanese EFL setting.

Key Words: *grammar, noun clause, adverbial clause, subordinate conjunction, if, when*

1. CONTEXT

The setting for this lesson is National Institute of Technology, Oita College. Students are aged between 15 and 16, and class size is about 40 students. Students' level of English is intermediate. They have studied English as a subject at junior high school for three years (three hours per week on average) prior to entering the college.

After their entrance to the college, students study English grammar in detail. The following are relevant grammatical items students will already know before this lesson: basic word classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and conjunctions), phrases, five sentence patterns (SV, SVC, SVO, SVOO, and SVOC), transitive and intransitive verbs, relative pronouns, and clauses (noun clauses, adjective clauses, and adverbial clauses).

The sentences which include either the *if*-clause or the *when*-clause have not been presented in the teaching of a noun clause or adverbial clause so as to avoid students' confusion, although they have learned noun and adverbial clauses using other subordinate conjunctions such as *that*, *until*, and *because*.

So far, the students have been involved in a deductive way of grammar teaching in Japanese, so this becomes the first time for them to experience inductive teaching.

2. AIMS OF THE LESSON

At the end of the lesson, students will be better able to:

- Understand how to distinguish between noun and adverbial clauses.
- Understand that in an adverbial clause which refers to future or condition, the present simple is used.
- Write and speak with the correct adverbial clause form when they refer to future or condition.

3. INTENDED OUTCOMES OF THE LESSON

By the end of the lesson, regarding sentences of [the main clause + *if*- (or *when*-) clause], students will be better able to:

- Understand that the *if*- (or *when*-) clause that can be moved to the top of the sentence without making the rest ungrammatical is an adverbial clause.
- Understand that the *if*- (or *when*-) clause that can be deleted out of the sentence without making the rest ungrammatical is an adverbial clause.

- Understand that the *if*-clause where *if* can be replaced by ‘whether or not’ is a noun clause.
- Understand that the *if*- (or *when*-) clause which is an object of a transitive verb is a noun clause.
- Understand that the *when*-clause where *when* can be interpreted as ‘when..., then’ is an adverbial clause.
- Understand that in an adverbial clause which refers to future or condition the auxiliary verb *will* is not used.

4. TEACHING PROCEDURE

This inductive way of teaching is to be conducted in the following way.

(1) Review

Confirmation of the three clauses: noun clauses (functions as a noun), adverbial clauses (mainly modifies a verb, adjective, and adverb), and adjective clauses (modifies a noun).

(Noun clause)

I think that it will be fine tomorrow.

(Adverbial clause)

I slept early because I was sleepy.

(Adjective clause)

I saw a man who was wearing a funny hat.

(2) Divide the class into groups of six (G1, G2, G3, etc.). There are six students, S1 to S6, in each group. Give each group two sets of sentences: Set A and Set B.

Set A: Sentences where the *if*-clauses are embedded.

- I'll be happy if you meet me at the airport.
- I don't know if it will rain tomorrow.
- I wonder if he will agree with you.
- Don't worry if I'm late tonight.
- I'll ask her if she will go to the concert tomorrow.
- You will be punished if you do anything wrong.
- I'm not sure if he will come back.
- I won't go out if it rains tomorrow.
- I'm going out now. Can you take a message if anybody phones?

Set B: Sentences where the *when*-clauses are embedded.

- Who cares when she will marry?
- I'll phone you when I get there tomorrow.
- Open your eyes when you are ready.
- We don't know when he will come home.
- I'll ask her when she will leave Tokyo.
- You'll be disappointed when you know your exam results.
- It is difficult to say when the president will arrive here.
- We're going on holiday tomorrow. I will tell you all about it when we come back.
- He looks very different now. You won't recognize him when you see him tomorrow.

(3) Have learners study the sentences in each set, A and B, and divide them into two patterns in each set. Once they have tried, ask each group to divide the sentences again into two patterns by looking at the *if*- (or *when*-) clause.

(4) Have learners underline each *if*- (or *when*-) clause. Have learners try to work out the differences in specific feature between the two patterns.

(5) Ask them what the difference between the two patterns is. Have them realize that one of the patterns does not have *will* in each sentence, and the other has *will*.

(6) Hand each group a different clue card (see below), A to F, and have them tell which clause is a noun clause or an adverbial clause in each group based on the clue card given.

Clue Cards

Note that in the real clue cards answers are not presented.

Clue Card A

An *if*- (or *when*-) clause which can be moved to the top of the sentence without making the rest ungrammatical is (***** Answer: an adverbial) clause.

Clue Card B

An *if*- (or *when*-) clause which can be deleted out of the sentence without making the rest ungrammatical, is (***** Answer: an adverbial) clause.

Clue Card C

An *if*-clause which is an object of a transitive verb is (***** Answer: a noun) clause.

Clue Card D

A *when*-clause which is an object of a transitive verb is (***** Answer: a noun) clause.

Clue Card E

An *if*-clause whose *if* can be replaced by ‘whether or not’ is (***** Answer: a noun) clause.

Clue Card F

A *when*-clause whose *when* can be interpreted as ‘when..., then’ is (***** Answer: an adverbial) clause.

(7) Rearrange groups so that all the S1s of each group can make one new group, S2 another new group, and so on. Then have each student try to teach among the new group in English.

(8) Ask each group to report to the class.

(9) Write on the board the following, and explain the rules:

- I'll ask her if she will come here tomorrow.
- I'll ask her about it if she comes here tomorrow.
- I'll ask her when she will come back.
- I'll ask her about it when she comes back tomorrow.

(10) Have learners understand that a clause which does not use *will* is an adverbial clause.

(11) Have learners understand that in an adverbial clause which refers to future or condition, the present simple is used.

(12) Have students work with discrimination exercises (see the following example).

Example

Q. All the following sentences are about the future. Use *will / won't* or the present simple.

1. I will ask the clerk some questions if he (come) back.

2. I wonder if he (go) swimming tomorrow

3. I'm going away for a few days. I'll phone you when I (get) back.

5. RATIONALE

English is taught as a foreign language in Japan. English grammar, therefore, plays an important role for Japanese learners of English to learn how to use the language “accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately¹⁾”. However, there are typical difficulties which the learners tend to experience because of their first language background²⁾. For example, Japanese does not have the same idea of past, present and future tense that English does³⁾, which causes Japanese learners of English to misuse English tense form.

The reason for choosing this particular example is that most Japanese students often tend to misunderstand the distinction between a noun clause and an adverbial clause when both clauses include the *if*- (or *when*-) subordinate conjunction. Also, grammatical questions to test whether applicants can distinguish between these two clauses often appear in university entrance examinations⁴⁾.

Among the three clauses (noun, adjective, and adverbial clauses), the adjective clauses are relatively comprehensible to the Japanese learners of English because they frequently practice the modification of the adjective clause to nouns when they learn relative pronouns. The other two clauses, however, seem to be extremely difficult, from my own teaching experience, especially when students try to distinguish between a noun clause and an adverbial clause, both of which use the same conjunction *if* or *when*. For example, each subordinate clause in the following sentences is an *if*-clause;

- I do not know if it will rain tomorrow.
- I will not go out if it rains tomorrow.

Both *if*-clauses refer to the future; however, the *if*-clause in the second sentence does not use *will* but uses the present simple *rains*. Most English grammar books, furthermore, often state: “In an adverbial clause which refers to future or condition, the present simple is used⁵⁾”. This simple

explanation causes students to become confused and they still wonder why the second *if*-clause does not use *will* despite the fact that it refers to the future.

Consequently, students who become confused with the distinction between the two clauses tend to use *will* even in the adverbial clause, for example: **I will not go out if it will rain tomorrow*. To address this difficulty, I decided to investigate a better way of teaching how to distinguish these clauses so that learners of English will not misuse English tense forms.

Thus, my teaching approach in this lesson is different from the conventional Japanese approach in two respects. Firstly, while the traditional approach attempts to explain the *if*- (or *when*-) noun clause and the *if*- (or *when*-) adverbial clause separately just as English grammar textbooks do, my approach teaches them at the same time, and presents almost all the possible ways of distinguishing these two clauses in one lesson, which has never appeared in grammar textbooks in my opinion. From my approach, learners will easily be able to compare the features of the *if*- (or *when*-) noun clause with those of the *if*- (or *when*-) adverbial clause.

Secondly, while deductive ways of teaching have been dominant in traditional English grammar lessons in Japan, this approach attempts inductive teaching. I believe the inductive approach in this lesson will help learners to be ‘more attentive and more motivated⁶⁾’ when they look at two syntactically similar sentences. Furthermore, engaging in communicative activities through problem-solving tasks and exchanging information in English will better be able to raise students’ consciousness regarding this problematic grammar point.

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(Received September 30, 2016)