

# APPLICATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING IN AN EFL CONTEXT

**Brett Laybutt**

*College of Business and Communication*

## ABSTRACT

With a new college entrance exam system featuring speaking and writing starting in 2020 there have been calls for Japanese teachers of English to take a more communicative approach in the classroom, as opposed to the traditional Grammar-Translation method of *yudoku*. However, previous attempts at Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) have foundered due to Japanese-speaking teachers of English reported lack of confidence in their own speaking abilities to be able to apply communicative methodologies in the classroom. This paper will introduce Consciousness Raising (C-R) and how C-R tasks may be particularly suitable for a Japanese context.

## INTRODUCTION

In September 2017, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced yet another overhaul of the Japanese college entrance exam system, starting in 2020. The new system, perhaps with a view to the Olympics also coming in the same year, places a new emphasis on communicative skills of speaking and writing corresponding to the international standard Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and will for the first time allow private testing companies to conduct the tests in conjunction with the National Center Test for University Admissions multiple-choice listening-reading format. As a result, there have been calls for Japanese teachers of English to adopt the more output-oriented Communicative Approach to language teaching and incorporate more speaking activities in the classroom. Yet despite interest and enthusiasm in CA by teachers themselves there has been very little uptake on actual classroom practice. Most Japanese-speaking teachers of English report a lack of confidence in their own speaking abilities to be able to apply CA techniques in the classroom and there have also been some questions as to whether the Communicative Approach to language teaching is in fact appropriate in a Japanese context where teacher-fronted lessons and minimal expectations of student participation are the norm. This paper will introduce Consciousness Raising (C-R) and C-R tasks and demonstrate how these tasks may help

overcome these difficulties and be used for pedagogical grammar teaching in a way that promotes more autonomous and communicative learning for an EFL context in Japan.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

All pedagogical grammar, by drawing attention to certain grammatical forms, can be said to be a form of consciousness-raising in a way. Generally speaking, C-R can be defined as:

The deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention  
specifically to the formal properties of the target language

(Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985:274)

Consciousness Raising is a theory of language acquisition whereby conscious attention to linguistic form, without an attendant need for production or immediate output of that form, can directly play a role in developing target language acquisition. C-R contrasts to an “accumulated entities” approach, where language learning “entails the successive mastery of steadily accumulating structural entities” (Rutherford, 1987:4). It was pointed out, however, that this is not how language learning actually works and that learners usually pass through several stages of non-targetlike language (Long & Robinson, 1998). These stages demonstrate that the learning progression is instead a process of creating and rejecting hypotheses about the L2 as new data is added (Rutherford, 1987:18). These hypotheses stem from what the learner, consciously or unconsciously, ‘knows’ about the structure of language from their L1 (the ‘familiar’) and are then applied and refined to the target language (the ‘unfamiliar’). The learner might make some L2 errors while forming these hypotheses but these errors will not violate underlying principles.

C-R theory also posits explicit instruction as being a necessary part of the process of grammatical competence, though perhaps not sufficient in itself (Rutherford, 1987). Unlike Krashen's theory where there can be no transfer between learned and acquired knowledge (Nunan, 1999:44), C-R theory states that conscious learning can access underlying L1 structures and therefore have a direct effect on acquisition, with formal instruction accelerating the progression of acquisition leading to higher levels of the L2 (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Ellis (1994), for example, provides some evidence from various studies demonstrating that instruction does have an effect on proficiency and accuracy while Nunan

(1999) shows some relationship between instruction and levels of acquisition. Fotos (1993) also demonstrates that C-R successfully promoted grammatical proficiency gains.

There are three main features that define a C-R Task:

- Isolate a linguistic feature for attention;
- Provide data to be analysed;
- Elicit some rule regarding the use of this linguistic feature.

(Willis & Willis, 1996:64)

Methods of isolating linguistic features can take many forms (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith). One example, as in Appendix A, might be highlighting a simple grammatical rule through to more complex elaborations, and with more or less teacher guidance, or explicitness. C-R tasks may also be used in vocabulary instruction, as in Appendix B. Some of the practices of C-R have been included to some degree in many course books used today (Nitta & Gardener, 2005). Indeed, one criticism that has been made of C-R is that many of its applications are already being used anyway (Hopkins & Nettle, 2005). Out of theory of language acquisition that characterizes C-R there has arisen a number of other approaches to formal grammatical instruction, such as Task Based Learning (Ellis, 2003) and Data Driven Learning (Johns, 1991). C-R Tasks can thus be seen as “one part of a larger pedagogical context” (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985:280). The applications and benefits of C-R-Tasks are not limited, however, to just grammatical acquisition.

## **APPLICATIONS OF CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING**

### **C-R Tasks and Learner Styles**

As mentioned above C-R does not emphasise the role of output and one benefit might be on learner styles and strategies. The concept of the “good language learner” has gained ground since the mid-1970s and there is evidence of the usefulness of building learner strategies (Brown, 2000). However, Japanese students in particular tend to differ in learning style preferences (Reid, 1987:93) and a study by Busch (1982) found, in fact, no significant difference between extroverted and introverted Japanese students’ proficiency. In a Japanese educational context, therefore, where students are overly dependent on teacher-led instruction and often lack the appropriate strategies for more productive tasks C-R-Tasks, rather than practicing the linguistic forms, may be more appropriate. There is also some evidence that

pushing the use of strategies in class can be problematic (Ellis,1994). Forced output, for example, may have the opposite result and make the student more self-conscious and reluctant to speak (Batstone, 2001). C-R-tasks, rather than building competence, could instead help facilitate the use of rule-inducing strategies without the pressure of production, although more research is still needed into whether learning strategies can be changed (Nunan, 1995).

### **C-R-Tasks and Motivation**

In EFL contexts such as Japan students have little opportunity for real interaction outside the classroom. As such students often have little real instrumental motivation, or practical goals, beyond the classroom itself (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). A goal of “spontaneous, unreflecting language use” (Sharwood Smith, 1981:159) can seem too distant (Li, 2001) and this can affect students’ motivation. In such cases the intellectual nature of the task alone, regardless of actual language use, can provide a classroom focus. This may especially be the case for those “Japanese students who prefer not to initiate in class” (Holliday, 1994:170) and C-R tasks may help teachers be sensitive to those students unwilling to speak out in class (Brown, 2000:156). The novelty of the task alone may serve to provide motivation (Azer, 1994), regardless of whether the language is used correctly or not.

### **C-R-Tasks and Pragmatics**

In an EFL context C-R tasks can prove to be particularly useful in the areas of discourse and pragmatics. There is no reason why the concept of ‘rules’ cannot be extended to include discussion of differing modes of discourse and pragmatic ‘rules’, such as politeness strategies or ways of building cohesion within a text. These can be particularly difficult for EFL learners who do not have as much access to direct input outside the classroom as ESL learners might have. Yet there is also some evidence that these pragmatic features can be successfully learned through explicit instruction in the classroom (Lightbrown & Spada, 2006). Rutherford (1987) gives some examples for advanced learners of highlighting discourse patterns in a written text. C-R tasks can also be utilised for lower level classes with simple functions, such as ‘giving advice’ in Appendix C where the learners are asked to formulate a simple rule.

An important point that also must be considered for pragmatics is the fact that “not all English learners wish to behave pragmatically just like native speakers” (Eslami-Raskeh, 2005:207). Within both an ESL

and an EFL context learners must contend with a host of wider and often conflicting socio-cultural discourses (Roberts, 2001) that can make some learners resistant to the ‘teaching’ of pragmatics. In my own teaching situation learners can have a strong sense of wanting to retain their own identities while still wanting to learn about pragmatic aspects of studying English; the learners are interested in aspects of English-speaking culture without necessarily wanting to practise them formally. As such, discussing differences between L1 and L2 pragmatic features rather than practicing them may be preferable (LoCastro, 2003). By creating some distance between the text and the learner and removing the pressure of production C-R-Tasks offer a way for learners to discuss these pragmatic features “without being coerced into particular choices” (Roberts, 2001).

## **CONCLUSION**

C-R theory, therefore, puts forward a theory in which conscious decisions by the learner and formal instruction of linguistic items can play a necessary role in L2 acquisition. While there is still theoretical and empirical debate over the validity of this theory and whether this does, in fact, result in significant long-term effects, C-R tasks applied to the areas of learner strategies, discourse and pragmatics may prove more useful, as opposed to the original grammatical focus. Focusing on these areas may be especially applicable within an EFL context and more research, especially long-term, into the effects of C-R-Tasks for EFL learners on these factors may thus prove beneficial.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Batstone, R.** (2001) Contexts of engagement: a discourse perspective on 'intake' and 'pushed output', *System*, Vol. 30/1:1-14
- Brown, H.D.** (2000) *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, New York, Addison Wesley Longman, Inc
- Doughty, C. & Williams, J.**, Eds. (1998) *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Ellis, R.** (1994) *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Eslami-Raskeh, Z.** (2005) Raising the practical awareness of language learners, *ELT Journal*, Vol. 59/3:199-208
- Fotos, S.S.** (1993) Consciousness Raising and Noticing through Focus on Form: Grammar Task Performance versus Formal Instruction, *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 14/4:385-407
- Holliday, A.** (1994) *Appropriate Methodology and Social Context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Johns, T.F.** (1991) Should you be Persuaded: Two Samples of Data-Driven Learning Materials, *English Language Research Journal*, Vol. 4:1-16
- Lightbrown, P.M. & Spada, N.** (2006) *How Languages are Learned*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press
- LoCastro, V.** (2003) *An Introduction to Pragmatics: Social Action for Language Teachers*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press
- Nitta, R. & Gardener, S.** (2005) Consciousness-raising and practice in ELT coursebooks, *ELT Journal*, Vol. 59/1:3-13
- Nunan, D.** (1995) Closing the Gap between Learning and Instruction, *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 29/1:133-158
- Nunan, D.** (1999) *Second Language Teaching and Learning*, Boston: Heinle & Heinle Publishers
- Reid, J.M.** (1987) The Learning Style Preferences of ESL Students, *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 21/1:87-104
- Rutherford, W.E.** (1987) *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching*, Harlow, England: Pearson Education Ltd.
- Rutherford, W.E. & Sharwood Smith, M.** (1985) Consciousness-raising and Universal Grammar, *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 6:274-282
- Sharwood Smith, M.** (1981) Consciousness-Raising and the Second Language Learner, *Applied Linguistics*, Vol. 11/2:159-168
- Willis, J. & Willis, D.**, Eds. (1996) *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching*, Oxford: Macmillan Education

**Appendix A**

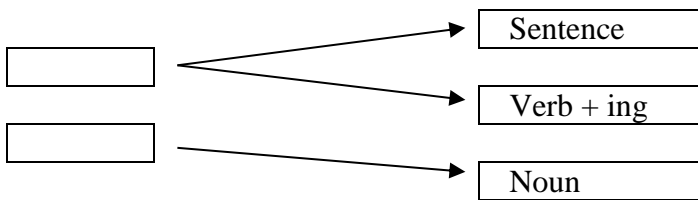
Which of the following sentences do you think are acceptable?

- E. g. 1. The tower was hit by lightning **during** the storm.
- E. g. 2. I hid under the bed **while** the storm.
- a. I usually watch TV **while** I eat dinner.
- b. My phone rang **while** I was sleeping.
- c. I fell asleep **while** reading the newspaper.
- d. The phone rang **during** dinner.
- e. I couldn' t sleep **during** the flight to Australia.
- f. I lost my wallet **during** walking to school.

Look at the words 'while' and 'during'. What kinds of words and phrases can come after them?

Is there any difference between them?

Please complete the following table and write the difference between 'while' and 'during' in your own words:



while: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

during: \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Appendix B**

**What's the difference between 'see', look at' and 'watch'?**

Please read the following story and underline 'see', 'look at' and 'watch':

Last year I went to Kyoto for my summer vacation. In Kyoto there are so many things to see, like temples and shrines. They were very beautiful. I also saw some interesting museums and galleries full of Japanese art. I walked around Gion and saw lots of old traditional houses. However I think my favourite thing was Nijo Castle. In the castle there was a painting of a tiger. It was so beautiful I stood and looked at it for 10 minutes! The castle also had a garden where I sat and watched the colourful carp swimming in the pond and drank some tea. That night I watched the fireworks near the river. While I was watching the fireworks I suddenly saw my friend from Australia. What a coincidence! It was a very nice trip.

Please complete the following table with either O or X:  
Who or what is *moving* in the story? Is it a surprise?

	<i>Me</i>	<i>It</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Surprise</i>
See				
Look at				
Watch				

Can you one explain the difference between 'see', 'look at' and 'watch' in your own words?

---

---

---

---

Can you think of more examples?

SEE	LOOK AT	WATCH



**Appendix C**

**Giving Advice Task-Sheet**

**Task 1:**

How would you give advice to someone in Japanese? Is there a difference between strong advice and soft advice? Do you think English is the same?

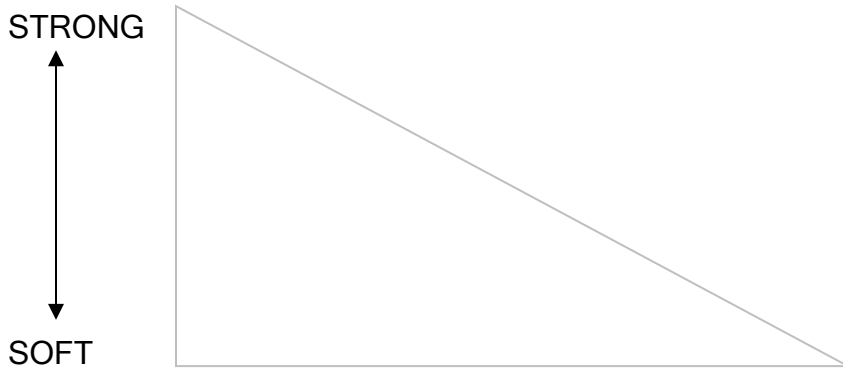
**Task 2:**

Look at the following phrases. Which ones are strong advice? Which ones are soft advice?

- Do it.
- If I were you, I' d do it.
- You should do it.
- It might be a good idea if you do it.
- Make sure you do it.
- You ought to do it.

**Task 3:**

Put the phrases into the diagram below.



**Task 4:**

What do you think the differences are between strong phrases and soft phrases?  
Can you complete the difference below in your own words?

**A strong phrase:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**A soft phrase:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_