
The Challenge of English Sentence Subjects (*Shugo*) to Japanese Learners

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Japanese learners of English in colleges, especially basic level students, tend to have difficulties in determining the proper sentence subject even after years of formal instruction. This problem of sentence structure could seriously hinder their development of English skills because in English sentences, the sentence subject is said to be the most important and powerful element controlling all grammatical elements in the sentence. Japanese sentences are also supposed to have a sentence subject, *shugo*. On the surface, however, Japanese sentences do not always have a subject, but scholars simply consider this an abbreviation of an understood subject. However, error analyses of Japanese learners of English suggest that the learners may not have correct understanding of sentence subjects in either language. This study presents an analysis of this particular syntactical problem, relates the issues to the theories of Japanese syntax, and proposes solutions to improve English education.

文法的に正しい英文を構築できない初心者レベルの大学生の比率は年々高くなる傾向にある。特に適切な文主語を設定できない学習者が多く、英文では主語が文全体の形態を決定するのでこれはスキルの向上を大きく妨げている。初級学習者の多くは日本語を英文に変換しているため、実際に使われている日本語文に主語がないことが英語の主語の問題に影響しているのではないだろうか。現在の教育では日本語に主語があるとされているが実際には使われない場合が多い。英語学習者のエラー分析の結果、学習者はどちらの言語でも正しい文主語の概念を持っていないのではないかと疑われる。この文主語の問題は英語、日本語がそれぞれの話者にどのように言語脳内で認知されているかにも関連があるという学説もあり、統語論、外国語教育を含む様々な領域に関連している。このリサーチは文の構造学の中で特に主語についてのエラー分析に基づき英語教育への提案も試みている。

Keywords: EFL, pragmatics, Japanese syntax, English syntax, sentence subject

Although we tend to assume that sentence subjects are obligatory in most languages, apparently, this is

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not the case. According to Matsumoto (2006), the group of languages that structurally require sentence subjects is smaller than the group in which a subject is not obligatory. A limited number of languages belong to the former group including English, German, French, Romansh, Dutch, and some Scandinavian languages (Pelmutter, 1971 quoted in Matsumoto, 2006, Tsukimoto, 2008). Whether or not Japanese

sentences have a syntactical subject has been a controversial issue in academia. Considering the long history of Japanese literacy, it is puzzling that scholars started energetically debating this issue a mere 50 years ago. Even more disturbingly, this impedes the foreign language learning processes for Japanese students. One of the reasons for the confusion is that the Japanese subject issue includes both syntactical and semantic aspects. Since this study deals with a Japanese learners' problem with English sentence structure, especially the sentence subject, the study's focus is with the Japanese syntactical sentence subject (subjective case).

Method

Eight hundred ungrammatical English sentences written by 95 basic and 74 intermediate level Japanese learners of English were categorized into 13 major error types. Among them, errors related to sentence subjects were analyzed and contrasted with corresponding Japanese sentences. Learners were also asked how often they translate from Japanese to English when they create English sentences, and which English grammar issues they have difficulties with (see Appendix).

Learners' Problem with English Sentence Subjects: A Type of Negative Transfer?

Language transfer from a learners' native language can occur when learners think in their native language, and transfer its unique features to their target language. Figure 1 shows how often, students claimed, they translate Japanese sentences to English. Among 187 students, fewer than 10% answered that they think in English and do not translate. The rest of the students translate from Japanese to English 50 to 100% of the time. This process most likely causes negative transfer from Japanese structure to English.

Figure 2 shows the numbers of actual errors in different grammar items found in students' writing. The most frequent errors are with general syntax, verb/verb phrases, sentence subjects, and articles. Thus, sentence subject-related errors are a serious problem. However, when students were asked what grammar points are most difficult, their answers (Figure 3) did not conform to the results in Figure 2. Learners are not aware they have problems with English sentence subjects. As a matter of fact, after semesters of instruction to pay attention to English sentence subjects, a great proportion of learners never make significant progress; they keep writing subject-

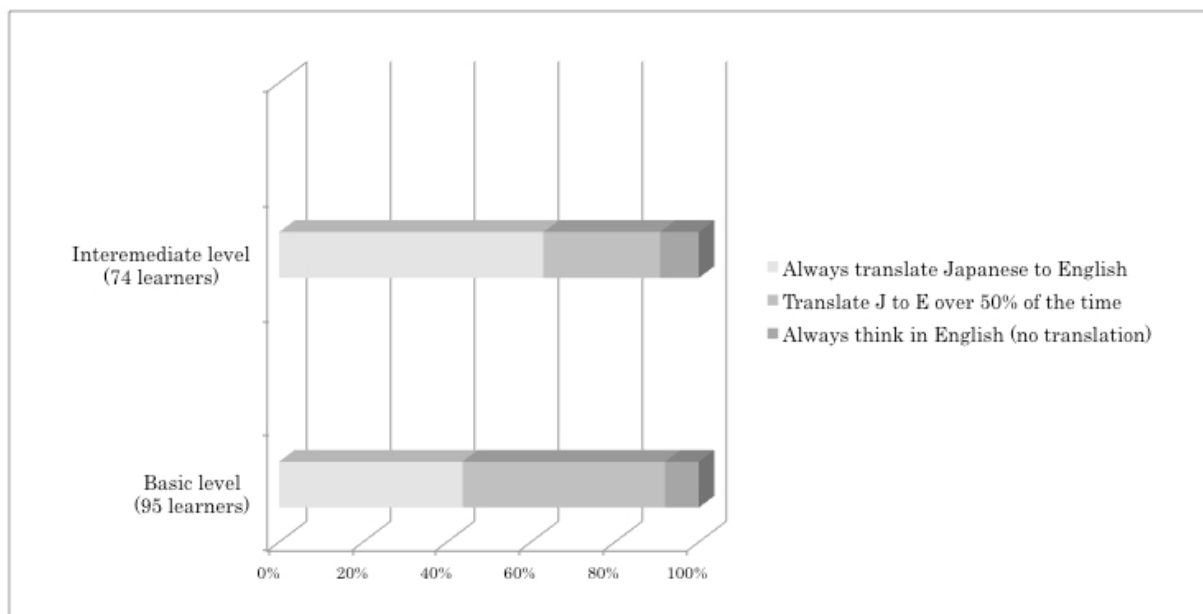


FIGURE 1. How often students translate from Japanese sentences to English.

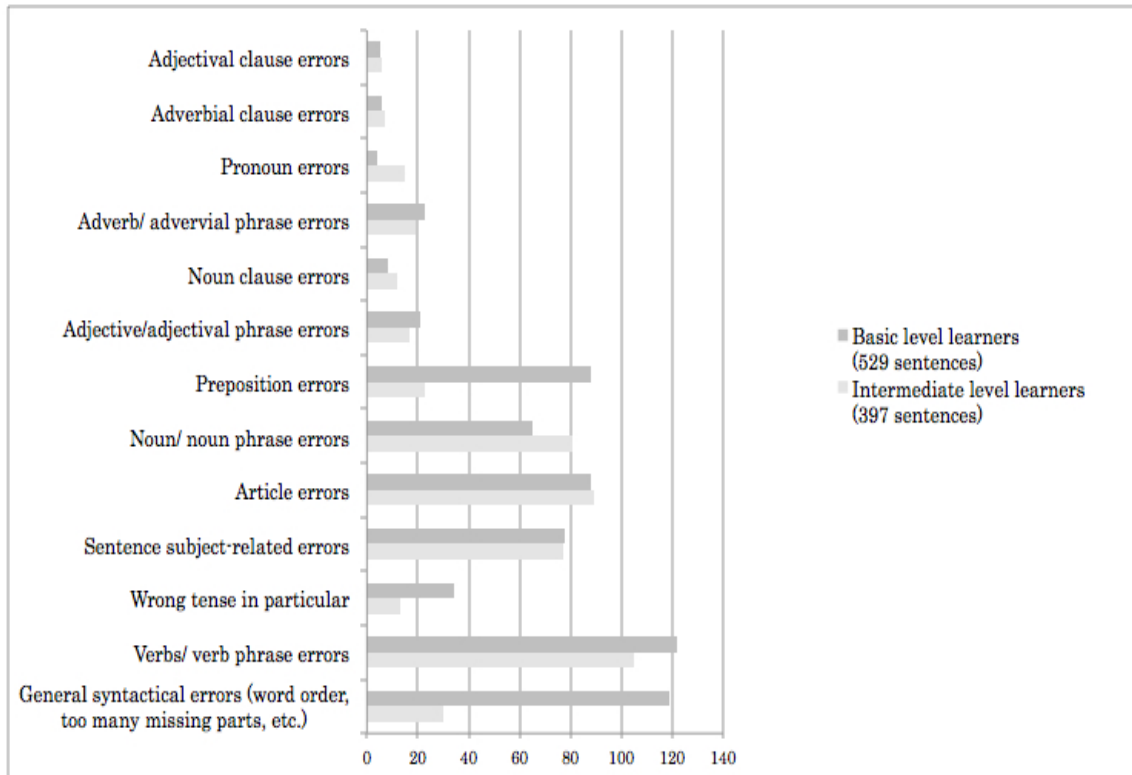


FIGURE 2. Number of actual errors in different grammar items

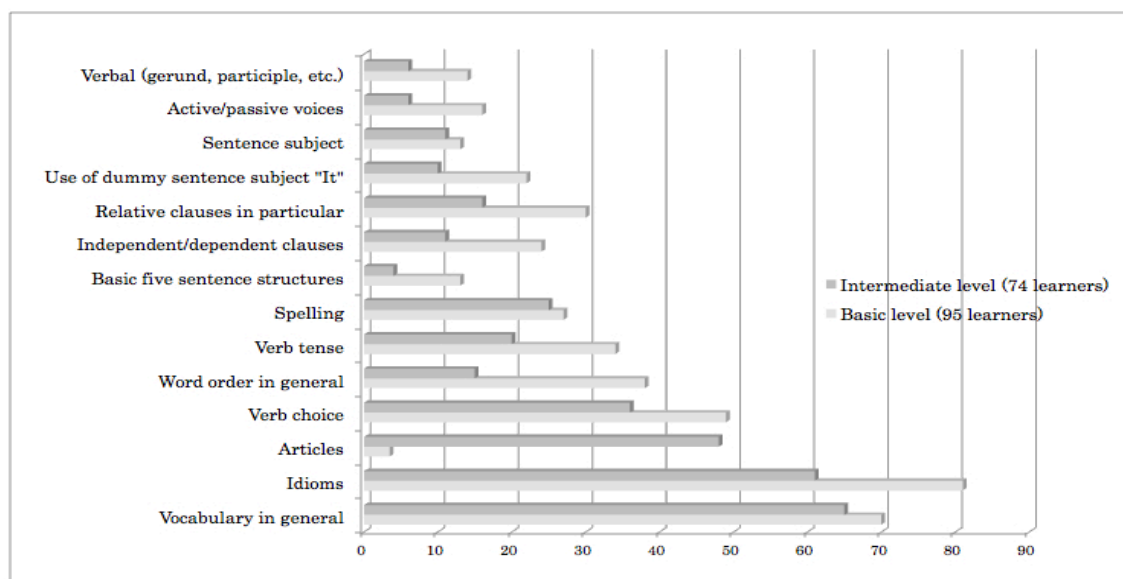


FIGURE 3. Grammar items that students claim to be challenging

free sentences or sentences with wrong subjects. In this study, errors with sentence subjects are categorized into several common types, and analyzed in relation with equivalent Japanese sentences to see if negative transfer is involved.

Analysis of Learner Errors with Sentence Subject in English

Error Type (A): Dummy Subject "It" Is Used Without Representing a Concrete Agent (Doer)

The English dummy subject "it" is mainly used "in the normal subject position in statements about time, distance, or weather" or "in the normal subject or object position when a more specific subject

or object is given later in the sentence” (OED, 2003), but is frequently used by learners in place of appropriate sentence subjects as if they do not feel the necessity for concrete subjects.

(*ungrammatical)

(A-1) **There are things that are more important than knowing the opposite sex. It cannot understand the opposite sex unless knowing the opposite sex.*

(A-2) **If it thinks only bad things, it becomes impossible to do anything.*

(A-3) **I am not working in order to do the management. It is working in order to make highest computer.*

In these sentences (A-1–A-3), the incorrectly used subject “it” can be replaced by, for example, “they” or “I.” However, these “it” sentences are natural without an explicit subject when translated to Japanese as shown in (A-2J) below.

(A-2J) *moshi warui koto dake o kanngae tara,*
If bad thing only OBJ think COND
nanimo dekinaku natte shimau.
nothing cannot do become RES

“It” is used as the dummy sentence subject for English sentences without a concrete subject.

(A-4J) *samui.* (It is cold)
cold

(A-5J) *ima go ji da.* (It is 5 o'clock now.)
now five o'clock COP

It can be assumed that Japanese learners often use the subject “it” incorrectly in English because they consider “it” to be good for statements without clear subjects like the above examples (A-4J) and (A-5J).

Error Type (B): English Sentence Subjects Are Missing

(B-1) **I think that (missing subject) should not quit using nuclear power for two reasons.*

(B-2) **However, this opinion is wrong, and (missing subject) don't agree with their idea.*

(B-3) **The second reason is that (missing subject and verb) not discharging CO2 at the time of power generation.*

These ungrammatical sentences do not have sentence subjects (or clause subjects). However, the subjects can be easily filled with “we,” “I,” or “they/it.” Then, why do not the learners use a concrete subject? Again, in the equivalent Japanese sentences, subject words are not obligatory. For example, in (B-2J), a subject is not used in the second statement, but the sentence is natural in Japanese.

(B-2J) *shikashi, kono iken wa machigatte iru,*
however this opinion TOP wrong STAT
soshite karera no iken ni sansei shimasen.
and their POSS opinions DAT agree do NEG

Japanese speakers often do not emphasize pronouns equivalent to “I,” or other words that suggest agents when the subject/agent is obvious, or even when not obvious. Nakajima (1987) wrote that emotions and intentions are always expressed from the speaker's viewpoint in Japanese so that the subject does not need to appear in such sentences, while English sentences are expressed from the viewpoint of its sentence subject. Also, it is said that understood topics/subjects can be omitted in Japanese social situations that are intensely grouped and closed (e.g., Makino and Tsutsui, 1989). Additionally, it has been argued that modern day pronouns are imported from western languages, and the Japanese language does not require them (e.g., Kanaya, 2002). Therefore, it can also be hypothesized that students may have difficulties using English pronouns properly.

Error Type (C): General Topic Is Incorrectly Used as the Sentence Subject for English Sentences

In these types of ungrammatical sentences, the topic of the speech situation is erroneously used as the sentence subject. In these sentences, even if the topic is shown, there is no subject, and the predicate does not provide clear meanings.

(C-1) **Christmas is cake.*

(We eat cake at the time of Christmas?/Cake is the most important thing at the time of Christmas?/Christmas means that we eat cake?)

(C-2) **Sunday is dating.*

(I am dating on Sundays?/Sundays are good for dating?/People should date on Sundays?)

The meanings of the above sentences can be interpreted in many ways. Similarly, the Japanese counterparts (C-1J) and (C-2J) do not provide clear meaning.

(C-1J) *kurisumasu wa keeki da.*

Christmas TOP cake COP

(C-2J) *nichiyoubi wa deeto da.*

Sunday TOP dating COP

However, these Japanese sentences are commonly used, and it seems that the precise meanings are not considered important. This sentence structure, called “predicate structure” has been used for at least one thousand years from the 10th century. For example, *Makurano-soshi*, a book of observation and musings, written by Seishonagon around 990 A.D. already used sentences composed simply of a topic and a short predicate.

haru wa akebono. (In spring, the time of dawn is good?)

spring TOP dawn

natsu wa yoru. (In summer, night time is good?)

summer TOP night

aki wa yugure. (In autumn, evening is good?)

fall TOP dusk

fuyu wa tsutomete. (In winter, early morning is good?)

winter TOP morning

It seems that subject-free, predicate-only sentences are a Japanese tradition. Again, the exact meanings of these sentences are not clear, and readers or hearers decide the meaning of such sentences.

Error Type (D): The Subject Is Detached from the English Sentence, and Is Expressed in Adverbial Phrases and Attached to the Sentence

In this kind of erroneous English sentence, subjects are treated as the topic in an adverbial phrase, and there is no appropriate subject in the main clause.

(D-1) *As an employee, there is fear that *a person is a little tooth on a giant cogwheel.*

(As an employee, I have a fear that?/An employee has a fear that?)

(D-2) *A reason for declining birth rate, *it is in a woman's order of desirable priority of marriage and children.*

(One reason for declining birth rate is related with women's decreased order of priority regarding marriage and having children?)

(D-3) *A solution to declining birth rate, *improvement of childcare system and social security system is needed.*

(One solution for the declining birth rate is to improve the childcare system and social security system.)

In (D-1) “there is/are” structure is used. Japanese learners tend to overuse “there is/are” structures. This probably comes from learners’ preference for the popular Japanese verb “*aru*” (exist). Some scholars claim that Japanese is a language of “*aru*” (exist) and “*naru*” (become) while English is a “*suru*” (do) language (e.g., Ando, 1996; Kanaya, 2003). When the verb “*aru*” (exist) is used, the sentence may not need a subject (doer). In D-2 and D-3, the first part [A reason for declining birth rate], and [A solution to declining birth rate] are the literal subjects of the sentences, but the learners chose to treat them as topics, and made them separate from the main sentence. These examples may reflect the reality of spoken Japanese sentence structure; that is, although a topic (*shudai*) exists, a clear sentence subject is not usually used.

Does Japanese Really Have Sentence Subjects?

There seem to be roughly three varieties of analysis regarding Japanese sentence structure, especially sentence subject. The first approach, which may be the most prevalent, is that Japanese sentences have a sentence subject similar to English sentences. Current Japanese “school grammar” taught from elementary to high school, based on the so-called “Hashimoto grammar,” assumes the existence of a sentence subject (*shugo*) (e.g., Kuno 1973, 1983; Kuroda, 2005; Shibatani, 1990). This analysis is largely influenced

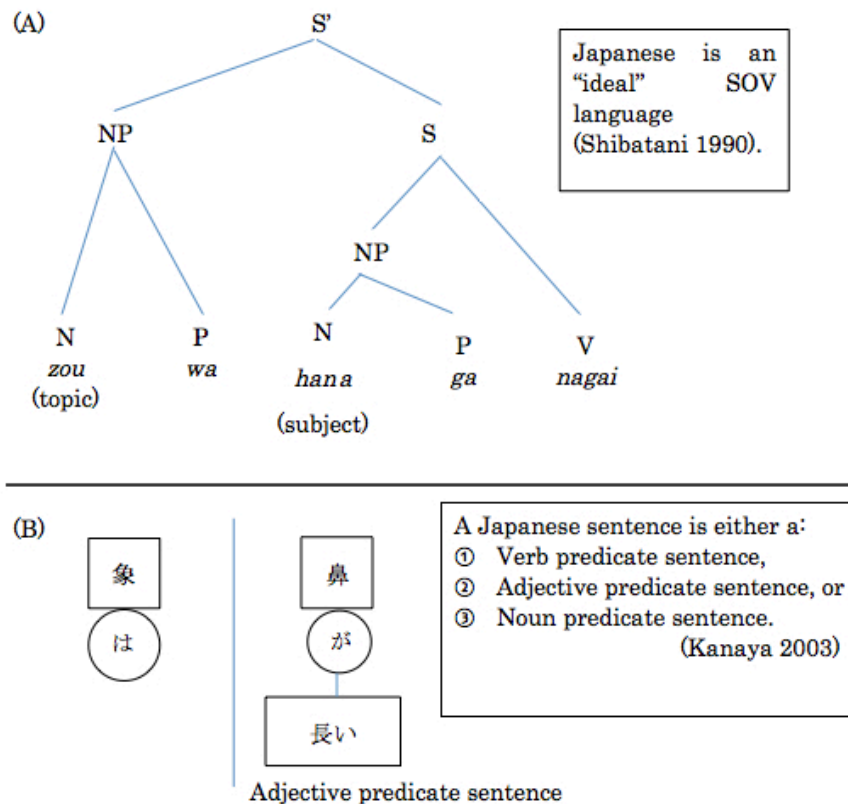


FIGURE 4. Different analysis of Japanese sentence structure

by western linguistic studies and was introduced to Japanese school grammar decades ago. In this view, Japanese sentence structure can be analyzed like English, with the exception that Japanese sentences follow SOV structure while English sentences have SVO structure [see (A) in Figure 4].

The second analysis of the issue claims that Japanese does not need a sentence subject, and historically has never had one: sentences are composed of predicates only and sometimes have a topic. (e.g., Hattori, 1966; Kanaya, 2002, 2003; Mikami, 1975; Nakajima, 1987; and Tsukimoto, 2008). [see (B) in Figure 4]

A neurological approach may support this view. Based on neurological experiments on brain behavior using several languages, Tsukimoto (2008) claimed that the brain of speakers of languages in which vowels are dominant, including Japanese, tend not to need sentence subjects. Vowels are processed in the language area of the left brain. On the other hand, consonants are acknowledged in the right

brain and their information is transferred to the left brain. The right brain is also responsible for differentiation between "self" and "other." As a result, vowel-dominated languages are processed faster than consonant-dominant languages. Also vowel-dominant languages do not cause active cognition of "self" and "other." The speakers of consonant-dominant languages such as English, on the other hand, discriminate between "I" and "other" more clearly and use sentence subjects as well as personal pronouns. Tsukimoto and other related researchers also identified the correlation between vowel dependency and subject omission (e.g., Tsunoda, 1978).

Another approach to Japanese syntax takes a position between the previous two. There are differences among the supporters of this group. For example, Tsunoda (2009) stated that compared to English, Japanese sentence subjects have a weaker syntactic function, and thus are less important. Noda (2002) proposed that the *shudai* (topic) should be

separated from the idea of *shugo* (subject) which is considered to have multiple functions including being the nominal case, the agent of the verb, and the agent to show the topic.

Approaches which do not vehemently support *shugo* in Japanese seem to be closer to the reality of actual language use: predicate-only structures are widely used. At the same time, *shugo* (or agents/doers) does appear in Japanese sentences, so *shugo* as a subjective (nominative) case may be optional as well as other grammatical cases that complete the full meaning of a sentence. As Nakajima (1987) wrote, Japanese may not be a language which can be analyzed fully by its syntax, and its meaning may depend more on semantic or pragmatic analysis.

Conclusion and Suggestions for English Teaching

To discuss whether or not Japanese has a sentence subject is not at all the primary purpose of this study. The intent is to determine the relevance of Japanese learners' English errors to their understanding of the structure of their native language. Based on the error analyses, it can be argued that Japanese learners' problem with English sentence subject is largely created by their idea of Japanese sentences; thus, negative transfer is the cause. Then, the next step is to consider solutions.

By the time students are in college, it is fairly difficult to make a drastic improvement in their syntactical understanding of English. Early stage instruction may be significantly useful. However, currently, young students are mostly engaged in communicative learning; thus, it may not be ideal to introduce structure focused instruction at an early stage. Based on this notion, some ideas can be proposed including the following.

Give learners some opportunities to think about the differences between their native language and English in relation with the use of sentence subjects. The following are some examples:

1. Present Japanese fairy tales in both Japanese and English. Most Japanese sentences do not have sentence subjects (agent/doer), and the subject

positions of English sentences are not filled. Instruct them to add appropriate subject words to their English sentences from the Japanese context.

2. Compare the use of English and Japanese nouns that reference people such as "you" (*anata, omae, name+san, kimi, etc.*) and "I" (*watashi, ore, watakushi, okaasan, boku, etc.*) to see how English subjects and Japanese subjects are very different, and thus cannot be treated in the same way.
3. Emphasize the nature and limited use of the dummy subject, "it."
4. Use natural sentences for Japanese translations of English. Where appropriate, Japanese sentences should not include a subject word.
5. Discuss English language culture in comparison with that of Japanese. For example, being familiar with the differences of "do" language culture and "existing" language culture may help learners intuitively understand how to begin sentences in each language.

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Author's Biography:

Nobuko Trent holds degrees in English (BA), Japanese (MA), and foreign language education (Ph.D.). Her primary interests include discourse grammar and politeness studies.

Appendix

Questionnaire (無記名です)

- (1) 英語の文章を作るとき(書く、話す)、まず日本語で考えてからそれを英語に変えますか?○をつけてください。
- (A) 日本文で考えて英文へ変換することが多い。
(B) いつもはじめから英語で考える。
(C) どちらともいえない。両方の場合がある。
(A) = _____ パーセントくらい、(B) = _____ パーセントくらい
(A, Bの合計が100%になるようにお願いします。)
- (2) 英語の文章を作るとき(書く、話す)、難しいと感じることはなんですか?以下から選んでください。該当するものにすべてチェック(✓)をつけてください。より深刻なものにはダブルチェック(✓✓)をお願いいたします。
- (1) () 適当な英単語が浮かばない。
(2) () 単語の並べ方(語順)が良くわからない。
(3) () 英文には必ず主語が必要だが主語を何にしたら最も適当なのかよくわからない。
(4) () どのようなときにItを主語にできるのかよくわからない。
(5) () 英文の基本5文型のどれをつかったらいいのかわからない。
(6) () 基本5文型を知らない。または5文型の考え方に賛成できない。
(7) () 一文の中に複数の節(主節、従節)があるときどちらが主節なのかわからない。
(8) () 関係代名詞の働き、関係節の作り方が良くわからない。
(9) () 英文の動詞は何にするか迷う。
(10) () 動詞の時制(現在、過去、未来、進行形、完了形)がよくわからない。
(11) () 受動態(受身形)と能動態がわからない。
(12) () 準動詞(I want to travel, crying child, I enjoy drinkingなど)がわからない。
(13) () a/theなどの冠詞がわからない。
(14) () 慣用表現(イディオム)などの知識が足りない。
(15) () 単語のつづり方がよくわからない。
(16) () 辞書の使い方がわからない。

TOEIC, TOEFLを受けたことがありますか?差し支えなければスコアをお知らせください。
(無記名です)