A Suitability Evaluation of Textbook Contexts Introducing Grammar

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1. Introduction

Previous studies of second language acquisition have demonstrated that language acquisition is not the result of a fragmented accumulation of knowledge regarding a language. It is also not the result of habit formation through mechanical rote learning. An argument exists in second language acquisition theory that in order to turn input into intake, the learner's attention must be guided toward noticing the specific language form within that input (Schmidt, 1990; Gass, 1997; Doughty, 2001).

Awareness in grammar learning is created when a target grammar is introduced in contexts where use of the specific grammar is essentially required. It is therefore necessary to create contexts appropriate to that perspective. However, a survey of contexts introducing the passive voice (Ito, 2010) showed that suitable context creation was only found in some textbooks. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) published a revised edition of its middle school-approved textbooks in April 2016. Given the strong influence of textbooks, which "play an important role in school education as a principal teaching material" (MEXT, 2016), an examination of textbooks to determine the suitability of contexts from the perspective of grammar learning is of higt significance.

The passive voice and postpositive present participles are the grammar points focused on in this study. In order for learners to be able to use these grammar points in real-life communication, they need to learn the respective sentence patterns at the same time they notice and understand their grammatical functions. The contexts introducing grammar points in the texts and exercises in textbooks that provide the learner with the opportunity to use that

grammar both play an important role. Contexts should be created in a way that encourages the learner to notice and understand grammatical functions. This study uses this perspective to evaluate the suitability of text and exercise contexts introducing the passive voice and postpositive present participles taken from all six series of revised textbooks.

2. Context Suitability

It is important for learners to notice grammatical functions as part of their spontaneous cognitive behavior; to have them ask, "Ah! Why is this grammar point being used in these types of situations?" The point of context is to make learners notice the intrinsic function of various grammar points one their own. Suitable contexts created to encourage the learner to notice and understand a grammar point allow them to acquire that point with the ability to use it in real-life communication. At the same time, unsuitable contexts, which introduce a grammar point in an unnatural or artificial way, do not allow the learner to notice and question why that grammar point has been used, and therefore do not help in building a learner's real-life communicative proficiency.

The remainder of this article discusses suitable contexts for the passive voice and postpositive present participles.

2.1 Passive Voice

What sort of contexts introducing the passive voice are evaluated as being formed in a way that is suitable for causing the learner to notice it? Ando (2005: 347) explains the function of the passive voice in these terms: "The principal reason to use the passive voice is to turn the 'patient' into the subject." In contrast to the active voice, where the focus of the subject is on the agent, in the passive voice the focus of the subject is on the recipient of the action. Under what circumstances does the patient become the subject? First, under the principle of end focus, which is when the patient becomes the subject to sequence information flow from old information (i.e., the patient) to new information. Secondly, in cases where attention is directed away from the expression of the agent.

Do the texts in textbooks create contexts based on these functions of the

passive voice? Texts introducing the passive voice in textbooks were evaluated on a three-grade basis from this perspective, expressed as ++ (the sentence given in the passive voice is within a suitable context for either the first or second use), + (partially suitable for the context) and – (not suitable for the context).

Furthermore, do the exercises in textbooks create contexts based on the functions of the passive voice? The exercises were analyzed from a task-essentialness perspective (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993), which considers the strength of the essentialness of the relevant grammar point–here, the passive voice–to the completion of the tasks prescribed in the exercise. Tasks were divided into three categories for this analysis: 1) task-essentialness, where the grammar point was essential to describing the task; 2) task-usefulness, where the grammar point was not essential but was useful to describing the task; and 3) task-naturalness, where the use of the grammar point was natural.

If the exercises are designed in a way that includes task-essential activities, they will make for more effective learning. However, it is extremely difficult to design activities in this way. It is particularly hard to control a learner's use of language in production activities (speaking, writing), making them impossible to create (Loschky and Bley-Vroman, 1993). This is made clear by the fact that most exercises in middle school and high school textbooks have accompanying sentences exemplifying language use. However, the greater the essentialness of the activities used in exercises, the higher the quality of those exercises, which are likely to increase the learner's proficiency in real-life communication. Therefore, the approach to analyzing exercises is to conduct a two-grade evaluation for whether the context created includes either task-essentialness, task-usefulness, and/or task-naturalness, expressed as + (with a suitable context), on the one hand, or – (not with a suitable context), on the other.

2.2 Postpositive Present Participles
(1) Who is the girl painting a picture over there? (*Forest*)
(2) The woman wearing a black hat is my sister, Jane. (*Breakthrough*)
(3) A ship carrying more than 500 passengers is missing. (*Next Stage*)

A postpositive present participle is a restrictive modifier following an ante-cedent noun. The restrictive rule clearly stipulates the "state of action, behavior, condition, or so on" (Tanaka, 2013) of a specific person or object by establishing a selection and/or limited conditions from a collection of potential antecedents.

In (1), "painting a picture over there" clearly explains the behavior of "the girl." The setting is likely to be one where there are multiple girls within the speaker's field of vision, and the speaker is clearly describing the behavior of the girl to specify that particular girl. Similarly, (2) could well be a setting where the speaker clearly states a condition to specify the woman who has the black hat on from a choice of women. This is because if there were no other women in the setting of (1), the postpositive "painting a picture over there" would be unnecessary and would not change the value of the information being communi-cated if it were left out. This is also the case for (2), where, if there were only one woman present, then "wearing a black hat" would be unnecessary. In fact, given that the inclusion of more information than necessary in a sentence is regarded as making unnatural conversation (Grice, 1989), it should not be added. Let us now consider (3). The inclusion of "carrying more than 500 passengers" could either specify a particular boat from the countless boats around the world, or it could clearly stipulate the boat's condition by adding necessary information about the boat under discussion. Considered in this way, the clear stipulation of a state of action, behavior, or condition through a postpositive present participle can be seen as having two functions: 1) specifying a target from a collection of possible antecedents or 2) providing a detailed explanation of an antecedent (if not specifying a target). These two functions are not mutually independent of each other, and it is valid to see (1) and (2) both included within the core of (2).

Do the texts in textbooks create contexts based on the functions of post-positive present participles? A three-grade context evaluation was conducted of textbook texts introducing postpositive present participles from the perspec-tive described above, expressed as ++ (demonstrating the function of specifying a target from a collection of possible antecedents), + (not demonstrating the function of specifying a target, but demonstrating the function of explaining an

antecedent in detail) or – (not demonstrating either function).

A two-grade evaluation was then conducted on textbook exercises to identify if contexts were being created to make the student use the postpositive present participle in a way that included either task-essentialness, task-usefulness, or task-naturalness, expressed as + (with a suitable context) or – (not with a suitable context).

3. Results
3.1 Results of Passive Voice Analysis

The results of the suitability analysis of contexts in texts and exercises newly introducing the passive voice are shown in Table 1. An exercise may be known by a different name depending on the textbook, such as "practice," "activity," "drill," "try," "speak" or "listen," and can also appear in the form of activities such as "speaking," "writing" or "listening," and are placed in order as "exercise 1" and "exercise 2" at the end of a text without any clear demarcation. Contexts for listening activities are evaluated based on the scripts provided in the teacher manual.

Table 1 Evaluation Results for Contexts Introducing the Passive Voice

Textbook, school year, lesson, page no.	Text	Exercise 1	Exercise 2
Columbus 21, 2, Unit 9, 112	+	+	+
New Crown 2, Lesson 8, 100	+	–	+
New Horizon 3, Unit 1, 6	++	–	+
One World 2, Lesson 8, 92	++	–	+
Sunshine 2, Program 11, 97	+	–	–
Total English 3, Lesson 1, 10	+	+	–

The basis for context evaluations for these texts is given below. Sections expressing the passive voice have been underlined.

(1) *Columbus 21*
Taku: Min-ho, we have a surprise for you.
Tina: Look! A Sky Surfers T-shirt.
Taku: <u>Our logo is printed on the back</u>.
Min-ho: Cool! Thanks. I love it.
Tina: I'm glad you like it. <u>It was designed by Aya</u>. (Rest omitted)

The "Sky Surfers T-shirt," introduced as new information in the second line, should appear in sentence-initial position as old information in the third line. The sentence should read "it has our logo on the back" to create a natural flow of information that conforms with the rule of sentence-end focus. Meanwhile, the "it" in "I'm glad you like it" in the fifth line becomes the subject in the following sentence to form a sentence introducing the passive voice and creates a context that fits the function of the passive voice.

(2) New Crown
Look at this photo. This is a sign in India. <u>Four languages are used on it</u>. <u>In addition to those, at least 30 other languages are spoken in India</u>. I speak three of them.

In the third sentence, the pronoun "it" denoting "the sign in India" (the new information provided in the second sentence) should be brought to sentence-initial position as old information, while the new information "four languages" should be placed in sentence-end position for the sentence to read as "it uses four languages." The fourth sentence is a case where attention is directed away from the expression of the agent, and is a context that fits the function of the original passive voice.

(3) *New Horizon*
This is a famous painting by Vincent van Gogh. <u>It is loved by many people</u>.

Van Gogh was influenced by ukiyo-e. Some ukiyo-e prints are shown in this painting. They were brought from Japan to Europe.

The two paragraphs introduce four sentences in the passive voice. The "it" in the second sentence refers to "a famous painting by Vincent van Gogh," the new information found in the first sentence, which it turns into the subject as old information in the second sentence to utilize the essential passive voice. The passive voice is used automatically in the third sentence when "Gogh" (the topic on this page) becomes the subject and the new information "ukiyo-e" is placed after it. In the fourth and fifth sentences given below, the "ukiyo-e" introduced as new information in the third sentence becomes the subject of the sentence as its topic, necessarily introducing the passive voice.

(4) *One World*

Water is very important in our lives. It's used in many ways. For example, our food is cooked with water, and our clothes are washed in it. (Rest omitted)

"Water" is the topic of this page. The passive is used essentially by turning it into the subject of the second sentence. In the following sentence, the specific example of "many ways" in the second is shown in two ways using the passive voice. Both are uses where attention is directed away from the expression of the agent, and are contexts that fit the function of the original passive voice.

(5) *Sunshine*

You can see many people on the roof. They are replacing the thatched roof. A large amount of thatch is used on each roof. (Omitted section)

My grandmother once said, "Long ago, we always helped each other in the community. Such a lifestyle was seen in many places in Japan. (Rest omitted)

The passive voice is introduced in the third sentence. The third sentence should be made to read "it uses a large amount of thatch" by placing "the thatched roof," the old information from the second sentence, in sentence-initial

position as "it" in the third sentence and placing the new information "a large amount of thatch" in sentence-final position. The second passive voice is introduced in the second sentence of the second paragraph. The subject "such a lifestyle" refers to the "we always helped each other in the community" from the previous sentence. By turning it into the subject as old information, a suitable context for introducing the passive voice is created.

(6) *Total English*

 Horyu-ji is one of the most famous temples in Japan. The temple is in Ikaruga, a suburb of Nara. <u>It is visited by many junior or senior high school students every year.</u> <u>It was built by Prince Shotoku in the Asuka era.</u>

 The temple has a lot of wooden buildings. The five-story pagoda is one of them. It was built in the 7th century. It is known as the oldest wooden building in the world.

 The subject "it" in the third sentence refers to "Horyu-ji," but it could be mistaken for "Nara," which appears as new information in the second sentence. There is no essentialness in using the passive voice in the third sentence, and should instead be rendered in the active voice as "many junior or senior high school students visit it," with "many junior or high school students" as the subject. The "it" in the third and fourth sentences of the second paragraph refers to the new information of "the five-story pagoda" in the second sentence, creating a suitable context for introducing the passive voice by turning it into the subject as old information.

3.2 Results of Postpositive Present Participle Analysis

 The results of the suitability evaluation for contexts newly introducing the postpositive present participle and exercise contexts are shown in Table 2.

Table 2 Evaluation Results for Contexts Introducing the Postpositive Present Participle

Textbook, school year, lesson/, page no.	Text	Exercise 1	Exercise 2
Columbus 21, 3, Unit 4, 46	−	+	+
New Crown 3, Lesson 6, 70	+	−	+
New Horizon 3, Unit 5, 70	++	−	+
One World 3, lesson 4, 48	++	+	+
Sunshine 3, Program 4, 55	+	+	+
Total English 3, Lesson 4, 58	++	+	+

The basis for context evaluations for these texts is given below. Sections expressing the postpositive present participle have been underlined.

(7) *Columbus 21*

Tina: Do you have any photos of your students?

Ms. Sarim: Yes, here they are. <u>The children studying here are my students</u>.

Ms. Sarim is explaining a photograph she is showing to Tina of the many students taking her class. Without providing any other information about the photograph, there is no possibility of interpreting the students' actions as anything other than studying, so stating "they are my students" is a natural thing to do. If there were no need to specify which children were "studying here" using a postpositive, there would also be no need to explain the condition of "the children."

(8) *New Crown*

Paul: This is a photo taken in 1962.

Kumi: What about it?

Paul: <u>Look at these men drinking water</u>. (Rest omitted)

Paul is showing a photograph of two men drinking water to Kumi. Because there are no other figures in the photograph, the function expressed in the third

line is not to specify a target from a collection of antecedents. The postpositive performs the function of explaining the condition of the antecedent "these men" by clearly starting the action of "drinking water."

(9) *New Horizon*

    Look at these robots playing the taiko drums. They were originally made as industrial robots. (Rest omitted)

    A photograph is shown on this page of two out of three robots playing *taiko* drums. The postpositive "playing taiko drums" in the first sentence performs the function of specifying a target from a collection of antecedents by clearly stating the actions of the antecedent, "these robots."

(10) *One World*

    Our next story is the International Jump Rope Festival in New York. The team jumping rope here is Japan's junior high Double Dutch team. That girl turning the ropes on the left is the team's captain, Mayu Ito. And the boy performing the "donkey" technique is the team's star, Takeshi Sato.

    A photograph is shown on this page of six men and women jumping rope. The condition of the antecedent "the team" is explained in the second sentence by clearly stipulating the behavior of "jumping rope." The third and fourth sentences introduce two figures each, and perform the function of specifying the target from a collection of antecedents – the "girl" and the "boy" – by clearly stipulating their actions.

(11) *Sunshine*

    Look at these pictures of animals playing together. They are called *Choju-giga*, or "Cartoons of Birds and Animals." When I first saw them a few days ago, I became very interested in them. I especially liked this scene of the frogs and hares enjoying wrestling. (Rest omitted)

Part of a wildlife cartoon (*choju-giga*) is shown on this page, depicting four hares and five frogs. In the first sentence, the condition is shown by stipulating "playing together" as the action of the antecedent "animals." The fourth sentence includes the same function. However, the function of specifying a target from a collection of antecedents is not demonstrated.

(12) *Total English*

Have you ever heard of Bhutan? <u>It's a small country lying between China and India.</u> It's very high in the mountains. <u>But people living there grow a lot of rice, fruit, and vegetables.</u> (Rest omitted)

The second sentence does not express the function of specifying a target from a collection of antecedents; it expresses the function of explaining a condition by providing the supplementary geographical information of "a small country." The function of specifying a target from a collection of the multiple antecedents "living there" in expressed in the fourth sentence.

4. Observations

4.1 Passive Voice

The results of the three-grade evaluation of the suitability of contexts introducing the passive voice in six series of revised textbooks were that two were suitable (++), four were partially suitable (+) and none were unsuitable (–) contexts. Those evaluated as suitable were contexts that naturally topicalized the passive voice to form the subject, and introduced the passive voice essentially. The results of the two-grade evaluation for exercise contexts evaluated two as suitable (+) in Exercise 1, and four in Exercise 2. The exercise contexts evaluated as suitable were created by appropriately topicalizing the passive voice to form the subject, as seen in (13), and contained task-essentialness.

(13)
Direction: Listen to the conversation and choose an appropriate choice below.
① □ baseball □ basketball □ soccer

② ☐ kangaroo ☐ koala ☐ panda

(The conversation heard by the student)

① This sport is played by two teams. Players usually can't use their hands.

② These cute animals are loved by many people. They're found in Australia. They sleep in trees more than 15 hours a day. (*New Horizon 3* exercise 2)

The exercises evaluated as unsuitable (–) were without context and consisted of mechanical drills requiring the learner to turn the sentence from the active to passive voice as seen in (14), which lacks task-essentialness.

(14)

Direction: Discuss the above pictures as shown in the example. (Illustrations are shown of a *kendo* mask, a bicycle, a knife, and a soccer ball).

(Example) Masks are used when you practice *kendo*.

bikes / use / when you go cycling

knives / use / when you cut something

soccer / play / all over the world (*Sunshine 2* exercise 1)

4.2 Postpositive Present Participles

The results of the three-grade suitability evaluation of contexts introducing the postpositive present participle in six series of revised textbooks clearly evaluated three as suitable, two as partially suitable and one as not suitable. Those evaluated as suitable were contexts with the function of specifying a target from a collection of antecedents, while those evaluated as partially suitable were contexts that did not have the function of specifying a target but did have the function of describing the antecedent in detail. Those evaluated as not suitable were contexts that failed to express either function.

The results of the two-grade evaluation of exercise contexts were that four were suitable in Exercise 1, and all six were suitable in Exercise 2. The exercise contexts evaluated as suitable were created with the function of specifying the target from a collection of antecedents as seen in (15), and contained task-essentialness.

(15)

Direction: Ken is helping Ms. Brown at a party. Listen to the conversation, and fill in the ①-③ (   ) box with a letter to show who to carry each item. (Eight people are shown on the picture, with a letter ranging from A-D assigned to each person. The different people are performing various actions.)

① chair ( ) ② tea ( ) ③ ( )

(The conversation heard by the student)

Ms. Brown: Could you take this cup of tea to Mr. Gray?

Ken: Where is Mr. Gray?

Ms. Brown: He's the one sitting on a chair.

Ken: You mean the man looking at the flowers?

Ms. Brown: That's right. (*New Crown 3* exercise 2)

Exercises evaluated as not suitable were without contexts, as seen in (16), and as a result lacked task-essentialness.

(16)

Direction: Discuss as shown in the example. For ③, think of and say a sentence that fits. (A woman is shown standing in ①, a man is shown reading in ② and a cat is shown under a bed in ③).

(Example) The boy playing the guitar is my brother.

① the girl / stand over there / Ami

② the man / read a book / Mr. Tanaka

③ The cat ____ under the bed is Shiro. (*New Horizon 3* exercise 1)

Many of the "tasks" in conventional textbooks cannot be called tasks. In most cases, this is because there was no information gap and no importance was placed on communicating the meaning of the content, with the grammar point already indicated. However, some of the exercises included in this study had exercises requiring the use of the relevant grammar point (or understanding in the case of listening exercises). Although these exercises specify the grammar point used in the example, they have been designed to have an information gap

and exchange of information between the speaker and listener, and are likely to increase the learner's interest in the information to be acquired and motivation to do the exercise.

5. Conclusion

In this study, the suitability of the contexts in textbook texts and exercises introducing the passive voice and the postpositive present participle were analyzed. The textbooks chosen for analysis were revised editions of MEXT's middle school-approved textbooks published in April 2016. The analysis revealed the following two points:

1. A third of the contexts in textbook texts were found suitable for the passive voice and half for the postpositive present participle. Approximately the same results were found in a previous context survey for the passive voice (Ito, 2010). The contexts introducing these grammar points show great room for improvement.

2. Of the contexts in textbook exercises, half were found suitable for the passive voice and ten out of twelve were found suitable for the postpositive present participle. The suitability evaluation of exercise contexts shows a wide gap depending on the grammar point. Further improvement for passive voice exercises is required.

Creating a textbook is a process that brings into conflict with strict limitations on the vocabulary and grammar that can be used, limited amounts of context, and strict conditions on the consideration paid to the educational value of the themes discussed. This makes the creation of suitable contexts a most taxing endeavor. However, considering the role suitable contexts play in grammar acquisition, greater efforts based on an understanding of its importance would be beneficial. Contexts evaluated as suitable (which is to say contexts created in a way that demonstrate the essentialness of using the relevant grammar point) make the learner notice the function of a grammar point, and help learners to improve their grammar acquisition.

The autonomy of the learner should be respected when it comes to lan-

guage use in exercises, and learners should never be told to perform an exercise based on instructions telling them to "use this sentence pattern." Designing tasks that allow learners to demonstrate their autonomy and take the initiative is an important aspect to which the textbook writer should aspire.

Only two of the many grammar points taught in middle school have been evaluated in this study. It should be clearly noted that these evaluations cannot be used directly to form a generalized evaluation of the textbooks involved.

Textbooks Analyzed

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NEW CROWN English Series New Edition 2, 3 (2016) Sanseido.
NEW HORIZON English Course 3 (2016) Tokyosyoseki.
ONE WORLD English Course 2, 3 (2016) Kyouikusyuppan.
SUNSHINE English Course 2, 3 (2016) Kairyudosyuppan.
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