

Development of the Revised List of Grammar Items: Focusing on the Usages and Functions of the Prepositions

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Abstract

This study investigates the usages and functions of prepositions and prepositional phrases for junior high school students in Japan who learn English as a foreign language. Developed to supplement the junior high school grammar curriculum, the List of Grammar Items offers a comprehensive grammatical framework aligned with Japan's national curriculum, the Course of Study. Through an examination of prior studies and related literature, this study aims to refine the Preposition section of the List of Grammar Items. The Preposition section in the Course of Study outlines four prepositions—*from*, *for*, *on*, and *to*—and their corresponding usages. Additionally, the Preposition section in the List of Grammar Items includes prepositional phrases, which are not explicitly addressed within the Course of Study's framework. Prepositional phrases function as adverbs, adjectives, or subjects. Based on the findings of this study, three grammar items related to prepositional phrases are added to the List of Grammar Items. The results of this study contribute to enhancing the educational relevance and theoretical rigor of the preposition section in the List of Grammar Items.

Keywords

Revised List of Grammar Items; Course of Study for junior high schools; Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items; prepositions and prepositional phrases

1 Purpose and Methodology of the Study

This study attempts to revise the "List of Grammar Items" (Takahashi & Okamoto, 2024), which was developed based on the "Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items" outlined in the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) (2018)¹. By incorporating findings from related research on the prepositions and prepositional phrases, the present study aims to propose necessary and appropriate revisions in the Preposition section of the List of Grammar Items. To achieve this objective, the study conducts a detailed analysis in other sections of MEXT (2018) than the "Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items."

¹ This is also referred to as 'the Course of Study' or 'the national curriculum.'

2 Grammar in Japan's Course of Study

MEXT (2018) emphasizes the holistic development of competencies through instruction aligned with the goals of five skill areas: listening, reading, speaking [interaction], speaking [production], and writing. This integrative approach aims to foster comprehensive communication skills. MEXT also underscores the importance of connecting linguistic resources with language activities through practical English use, enabling students to acquire skills applicable to real-world communication.

"Linguistic resources" are defined as "aspects related to the characteristics and rules of English" (MEXT, 2018, p. 145) and are categorized into four components: Sounds; Symbols; Words, collocations and idiomatic expressions; and Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items. Among these four items, the last one is directly related to grammar instruction.

3 Development and Evolution of the List of Grammar Items

3.1 Development of the List of Grammar Items

Takahashi and Okamoto (2024) emphasized that grammar knowledge should be effectively applied in communication, which is claimed in MEXT (2018). They also observed that MEXT does not explicitly specify concrete grammar items and noted a lack of research offering comprehensive compilations of grammar items to enhance classroom practices. These observations also aligned with previous studies (e.g., Ushie, 2013). Drawing on the observations, Takahashi and Okamoto developed the List of Grammar Items, specifying grammar elements essential for junior high school English classes. The List of Grammar Items is grounded in the "Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items" delineated in MEXT.

3.2 The List of Grammar Items

The List of Grammar Items comprises "grammar categories" and their subordinate "grammar items." Table 1 shows its 22 grammar categories and the number of grammar items within each category.

Table 1

Grammar Categories and Items of the List of Grammar Items

[A] Types of Sentences: Structure (28)	[L] Comparatives (21)
[B] Types of Sentences: Function (58)	[M] to Infinitives (23)
[C] Sentence Patterns (73)	[N] Gerunds (13)
[D] Pronouns (25)	[O] Participles (11)
[E] Relative Pronouns (13)	[P] Passive Voice (7)
[F] Conjunctions (30)	[Q] Subjunctive Mood Sentences (5)
[G] Modal Verbs (17)	[R] Nouns (9)
[H] Prepositions (15)	[S] Miscellaneous (50)
[I] Tense / Aspect (31)	[T] Situational Expressions (5)
[J] Adverbs (16)	[U] Supplementary (1)
[K] Adjectives (21)	[Z] Excluded Items (5)

Note. The letter in the square bracket represents the code for the given grammar category. The number in the curly bracket represents the number of grammar items in the given grammar category.

3.3 Ensuring Versatility in the List of Grammar Items

The List of Grammar Items was designed with versatility as a priority. It encompassed essential grammar categories and items, both of which junior high school students should know, as well as those that are considered desirable for their learning. Achieving balance—defined as harmonizing various grammatical elements without bias—was a critical consideration in this process. To ensure balance, careful attention was given to aligning multiple grammatical elements in a way that maintains overall stability and prevents excessive bias or omissions. For instance, when a complex item was included for one part of speech, items of comparable complexity were incorporated for other parts of speech to maintain fairness and consistency.

4 Examination of the List of Grammar Items

The completion of the List of Grammar Items initiated a thorough examination aimed at assessing its practical contribution to classroom teaching and the effective application of grammar knowledge. The examination was crucial for refining the List of Grammar Items, ensuring its relevance and efficacy in supporting teachers, and enhancing students' learning experiences.

4.1 Examination Beyond the "Sentences, Sentence Structures, and Grammar Items"

Whereas the List of Grammar Items was primarily grounded in the "Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items" framework outlined in MEXT (2018), this study recognized the need for a more comprehensive approach. To address the identified needs for adding new grammar items, further subdividing existing items, and incorporating additional perspectives, the study also extended its scope to examine other relevant sections of MEXT, going beyond the original framework. These sections include:

- "a. Sounds" in 2. (3) Items related to the characteristics and rules of English;
- "(ii) Items related to language functions" in (3) Items related to language activities and language functions; and
- "(d-(b)) Highlighting grammar for effective communication" and "(d-(c)) Practical grammar instruction with linguistic awareness" both in (2) Essential guidelines for teaching grammar (MEXT, 2018).

The extended examination aimed to ensure that the List of Grammar Items not only adheres to the foundational framework but also integrates supplementary elements, enhancing its comprehensiveness and relevance. By addressing these additional aspects, the List of Grammar Items would be better positioned to support English language instruction and facilitate enriched learning experiences for students.

4.1.1 "a. Sounds"

The section, "a. Sounds," includes 15 English sentences, each of which was evaluated for its potential inclusion as a new item in the List of Grammar Items. The following examples and their associated grammar items were considered:

- There is an apple on the table. (Use of the indefinite article *an* and the definite article *the*);
- Take it easy. (*it* as a pronoun, specifically "vague *it*");
- What time is it now? (*it* as the subject in time-related sentences); and
- Ken can play the guitar. (Use of the definite article *the* with musical instruments) (MEXT, 2018).

After careful evaluation, which considered the junior high school learning stage and the items' contribution to communication, it was decided not to incorporate these grammar points in the List of Grammar Items. This decision was based on their existing coverage under the "Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items," as well as the necessity of maintaining a balanced selection.

4.1.2 "(ii) Items Related to Language Functions"

The section, "(ii) Items Related to Language Functions," encompasses numerous sentences, some of which were evaluated for their potential inclusion in the List of Grammar Items. The corresponding grammar items were carefully reviewed. However, these items were either already represented in the existing List of Grammar Items or excluded at this point in the revision process to ensure a balanced selection within the List of Grammar Items. Examples found are:

- Oh, you saw a movie. Tell me more about it. (*more* used as a noun);

- It's forest, but you can explain what a forest is in English by using words you already know. Try it! (Contact clause);
- We have other bigger ones. Shall I show you some of them? (*one* in plural form);
- Oh, this one seems better. How much is it? (*one* as a pronoun);
- Really? He said he would come. (Sequence of tenses);
- According to the survey, 65% are interested in this problem. (Prepositional phrase cluster; 65% as a noun expression);
- I want to go to the museum. Will you show me which bus to take? (Interrogative + noun + infinitive); and
- We're thinking of making a birthday cake for Kumi. Will you join us? (be thinking of + gerund) (MEXT, 2018).

4.1.3 "(d-(b)) Highlighting Grammar for Effective Communication" and "(d-(c)) Practical Grammar Instruction with Linguistic Awareness"

The following sentences were analyzed for potential inclusion in the List of Grammar Items. However, they were ultimately considered unsuitable as new grammar items due to their complexity, which requires a more detailed analysis beyond the scope of the List of Grammar Items:

- I have been to the stadium many times. (*have been to* as a usage of the present perfect tense, meaning "have gone before"); and
- I have never been there. (Placement of *never* in the present perfect tense) (MEXT, 2018).

The consideration reflected the study's commitment to ensuring the List of Grammar Items remains both practical and balanced. At the same time, it highlighted areas that may warrant further investigation in future research to refine and expand the List of Grammar Items.

5 Issues Related to Parts of Speech

The present chapter addresses the findings from the examination of the List of Grammar Items in the previous chapter (4 Examination of the List of Grammar Items) and highlights the need for balanced and appropriate selection of grammar items. The primary challenge encountered is a fundamental question regarding the "Sentences, sentence structures, and grammar items" framework, specifically concerning parts of speech. Addressing this issue becomes a top priority.

5.1 Examination of Parts of Speech

Parts of speech play an indispensable role in English grammar. In modern English grammar, parts of speech are conventionally categorized into ten types, as outlined in references such as Yagi (2021), Oku (2017), and Nomura (2017): nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions, interjections, articles, and auxiliary verbs. Traditional grammar references, including Hosoe (1971), Yasui (1996), and Ando (2005), sometimes adopt an eight-type framework by classifying articles as adjectives and auxiliary verbs as a subset of verbs. On the other hand, Declerck (1991) proposes an 11-type framework.

The examination revealed that certain parts of speech—namely nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and interjections—were not explicitly addressed in the List of Grammar Items at its category or item level. Among these, interjections, often considered distinct from both content words and function words, were excluded from further analysis due to their limited relevance in junior high school English instruction.

In contrast, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs are content words with concrete meanings, making them vital for English learning. Their inflectional changes and classifications also necessitate further consideration. As for nouns, it is essential to understand singular and plural forms at the junior high school level. Students should also learn the distinction between countable and uncountable nouns. For instance, in *New Horizon English Course 1*, the MEXT-authorized textbook published by Tokyo Shoseki, nouns are explicitly discussed under the "Grammar for Communication" section, underscoring their importance. However, more detailed classifications, such as common nouns, collective nouns, material nouns, abstract nouns, and proper nouns, were deemed unnecessary at this stage. On the other hand, unlike nouns, MEXT-authorized textbooks generally do not provide detailed explanations of adjectives and adverbs, and MEXT (2018) does not emphasize their classifications. As a result, such detailed categorization was considered unnecessary for junior high school instruction.

These findings suggest a restrained approach to the treatment of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs in the List of Grammar Items, but the study identified a need for more detailed attention to pronouns and prepositions. These parts of speech have a significant impact on English comprehension and usage, warranting further exploration. However, due to space constraints, this paper focuses solely on the study of prepositions.

5.2 Prepositions

Table 2 is the Preposition section of the List of Grammar Items. The explanations of the selection of the items and the reasons for the revision are discussed in the following sections.

Table 2

The Preposition Section of the List of Grammar Items

[H]	Prepositions
H001	<Basic Prepositions> origin: <i>from</i>
H002	<Basic Prepositions> time: <i>on</i>
H003	<Basic Prepositions> duration: <i>for</i>
H004	<Basic Prepositions> place: <i>on</i>
H005	<Basic Prepositions> place: <i>to</i>
H006	<Prepositions> Other than basic prepositions (e.g., <i>from</i> 10 o'clock, etc.)
H007	<Compound Prepositions> <i>thanks to</i> / <i>such as</i> / <i>out of</i> , etc.
H008	<Separable Prepositions>
H009	<Prepositional Phrases> adverbial usage: part of the predicate
H010	<Prepositional Phrases> adverbial usage: modifiers
H011	<Prepositional Phrases> adjectival usage: predicative use
H012	<Prepositional Phrases> adjectival usage: restrictive use
H013	<Prepositional Phrases> adjectival usage: adjective form
H014	<Prepositional Phrases> a prepositional phrase as the subject of a sentence
H015	<Others>

5.2.1 Treatment in the Course of Study

In MEXT (2018), prepositions are explicitly addressed in the section titled "Prepositions." MEXT specifies the types of prepositions to be taught and provides detailed explanations to guide instruction. It highlights the importance of teaching prepositions that are commonly used in practical communication and situational contexts, ensuring that students develop a foundational understanding of their usage. It specifies the types of prepositions to be taught and explains as follows:

Prepositions are newly introduced as a grammar item. While learners become familiar with prepositions like *on*, *in*, and *at* in elementary school, they are formally treated as a grammar item starting from junior high school. Mastery of preposition usage enables students to use a variety of fixed expressions, making it essential to acquire foundational knowledge of prepositions at the junior high school level to develop productive language skills. (p. 46)

MEXT (2018) provides examples of preposition usage introduced in fixed phrases at the junior high level, including the following:

- Origin: I'm from Japan.;
- Time / Duration: On Tuesdays he goes to a swimming club. / We lived here for ten years.; and
- Place: Our store is on the High Street. / I went to Karuizawa last year.

5.2.2 Challenges in Teaching Prepositions and Explanations

Prepositions are widely regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of English grammar for Japanese learners. Ando (2005) observes that "English prepositions are intricate and multifaceted, making them particularly difficult for native speakers of Japanese, a language that lacks prepositions" (p. 624). This sentiment is echoed by many educators and researchers, even though Ando argues that prepositions can be less daunting when explained through analogies with Japanese particles and mirror-image relationships. These concepts, however, are not without their own complexities.

Asao (2021) further highlights the difficulty of prepositions, using *of* as an example, and argues that their complexity might rival that of the definite article *the*. The challenge, Asao asserts, lies not only in the various functions and uses of prepositions but also in the conceptual understanding of the prepositional object, which adds another layer of difficulty for learners. In addition, Yasui (1996) offers a formal definition of prepositions as "(prepositions) typically precede nouns and function as the head of prepositional phrases, which act mainly as adverbial or adjectival modifiers" (p. 598).

Ando (2005) provides further clarification, stating that "the objects of prepositions can be noun phrases or noun-equivalent phrases. In the latter case, the prepositional phrase itself assigns nominal characteristics to the object. For pronouns, the objective case is required" (p. 625). Furthermore, Ando identifies a wide range of potential prepositional objects, including noun phrases, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, gerunds, infinitives, prepositional phrases, and *wh*-clauses.

The challenges associated with teaching prepositions in Japan arise from their nuanced functions, diverse usage, and the conceptual complexity of prepositional objects. These factors highlight the need for careful, contextualized instruction to help learners understand not only the basic rules of prepositions but also their various roles within sentence structures. It is essential for effective teaching strategies to focus on demystifying these complexities by providing learners with ample examples and opportunities to practice prepositions in meaningful contexts.

5.2.3 Organization of Prepositional Phrases

Prepositional phrases, which are not explicitly addressed within the framework of MEXT (2018), are composed of a preposition and its object. Yagi (2021, pp. 379-380) provides a systematic framework for categorizing prepositional phrases, which this study adopts as the foundation for further analysis and refinement. The following is an overview of Yagi's framework:

- Functions as Adverb
 - Part of VP: I was *in London* when the earthquake hit Northern Japan.
 - Modifier: I was sightseeing *in London*.
- Functions as Adjective

- Predicative: It is *of great importance* to read as many books as you can while you are a student.
- Attributive: My friends *in Hawaii* are all Samoans. / My life *in New York* is a happy one.
- Adjective + preposition: I am *anxious about* how this will affect the weekend.

Although uncommon, prepositional phrases can function as the subject of a sentence. Ando (2005, p. 614) shows example sentences that illustrate this function: "Between six and seven will suit me." and "Through the wood is the nearest way." This function is included in the List of Grammar Items to ensure comprehensive coverage of prepositional phrase functions.

5.2.4 Revision of the Preposition Section in the List of Grammar Items

Based on the discussion above, prepositional objects, which are unfamiliar to learners, are likely to include adjectives, adverbs, and prepositional phrases. As Oku (2017, p. 595) categorizes, the prepositional objects can be:

- Adjectives as Prepositional Objects (Examples: for free, for sure, for long);
- Adverbs as Prepositional Objects (Examples: from abroad, until recently); and
- Prepositional Phrases as Prepositional Objects (Examples: from under the desk, since after the war).

Similarly, Akano (2014) identifies additional prepositional objects such as prepositional phrases, adjectives, adverbs, and the conjunction *that*. Examples from MEXT (2018) illustrating adverbs as prepositional objects include:

- So many people are over there.
- Look at the man over there.
- It's very near here.

Although the use of adjectives, adverbs, or prepositional phrases as prepositional objects rarely appears in early stages of learning and may not be intuitive as prepositional constructs, it is essential for teachers to possess this knowledge for effective instruction. Considering the established entries for gerunds as prepositional objects in the List of Grammar Items, this compilation would be appropriate to include the following entries to ensure a balanced and appropriate selection of grammar items:

- <Prepositional Phrase> Adjectives as Prepositional Objects;
- <Prepositional Phrase> Adverbs as Prepositional Objects; and
- <Prepositional Phrase> Prepositional Phrases as Prepositional Objects.

6 The "Revised List of Grammar Items"

The evolution of research surrounding the List of Grammar Items has revealed various examples and gaps, highlighting the need for revisions. To address these issues, MEXT (2018) was meticulously examined to identify both connections and deficiencies.

Through this detailed analysis, additional grammar items were identified as desirable for inclusion, leading to the incorporation of three items related to prepositions. The update was incorporated into the "Revised List of Grammar Items," enabling a more comprehensive and balanced presentation of essential grammar items for junior high school English teaching. Table 3 shows the Preposition section of the Revised List of Grammar Items which includes additional three items related to prepositional phrases.

The revised list enhances the utility of the List of Grammar Items as a teaching and learning tool, supporting educators in delivering more effective and well-rounded instruction.

Table 3

The Preposition Section of the Revised List of Grammar Items

[H]	Prepositions
H001	<Basic Prepositions> origin: <i>from</i>
H002	<Basic Prepositions> time: <i>on</i>
H003	<Basic Prepositions> duration: <i>for</i>
H004	<Basic Prepositions> place: <i>on</i>
H005	<Basic Prepositions> place: <i>to</i>
H006	<Prepositions> Other than basic prepositions (e.g., <i>from</i> 10 o'clock, etc.)
H007	<Compound Prepositions> <i>thanks to</i> / <i>such as</i> / <i>out of</i> , etc.
H008	<Separable Prepositions>
H009	<Prepositional Phrases> adverbial usage: part of the predicate
H010	<Prepositional Phrases> adverbial usage: modifiers
H011	<Prepositional Phrases> adjectival usage: predicative use
H012	<Prepositional Phrases> adjectival usage: restrictive use
H013	<Prepositional Phrases> adjectival usage: adjective form
H014	<Prepositional Phrases> a prepositional phrase as the subject of a sentence
H101	•<Prepositional Phrases> cases where an adjective serves as the object of a preposition
H102	•<Prepositional Phrases> cases where an adverb serves as the object of a preposition
H103	•<Prepositional Phrases> cases where a prepositional phrase serves as the object of a preposition
H015	<Others>

Note. The symbol • represents that the grammar item is added in the revision.

7 Conclusion

This study introduced a revised version of the Preposition section in the List of Grammar Items, reflecting recommendations from prior research. The revision addressed some immediate needs only for prepositions and prepositional phrases. Furthermore, the upcoming revision of MEXT-authorized textbooks should

emphasize the necessity of continuously updating the List of Grammar Items to adapt to changes in curriculum design and teaching materials, ensuring its continued relevance for junior high school English teaching.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Numbers 23K00785.

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