

A Note on Grounding in Japanese Junior High School English Language Classrooms

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Abstract

Grounding (Clark and Schaefer, 1989), is the process by which people, in order to add to their pool of shared information, strive to gain confidence in mutual understanding by providing each other with positive evidence of understanding. It is one that has been suggested to be of use to English language teachers at Japanese elementary schools (see Nakashima & Hine, 2021); however, it may well help guide English language teachers at Japanese junior high schools when they prepare for and conduct student-student communication activities.

A new English language curriculum is just this year being implemented at Japanese junior high schools, one which seems to be indicating that English language classes should be taught in English in order to maximise the students' exposure to the language (Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2017). This, in and of itself, is ample cause for English language teachers at Japanese junior high schools to feel some pressure; however, it also comes on the back of the implementation of a new English language curriculum at Japanese elementary schools in 2020, which has Japanese elementary school students receiving English language education from grade three. It seems reasonable to say that the students entering Japanese junior high schools are becoming more and more capable with the English language and, in turn, will surely be requiring more of their English language teachers than was previously the case.

In Nakashima & Hine (2021), it was suggested that the concept of 'grounding' (Clark and Schaefer, 1989) might prove to be an important concept for teachers working at Japanese elementary schools. However, the usefulness of the concept of grounding is surely not limited to elementary school English language classrooms. As such, this paper aims to look at the possible application and relevance of the concept of grounding in junior high school English language classrooms.

1. Grounding

What follows is a summary of the concept of grounding, with the intended purpose of introducing the concept to the uninitiated, and to refresh the memory of those for whom this is not the first time. However, for more examples, and a more thorough explanation, please see Nakashima & Hine (2021).

1.1 The concept of grounding

According to Clark & Brennan (1991), grounding is the process people go through to add to their common ground, which is information that all parties participating in the interaction believe to be shared or understood. This shared information, or common ground, according to Clark & Brennan (1991), forms the basis with which people co-ordinate with each other during interactions. For example, two people at a party finding out they both grew up in Australia would be able to assume a wealth of shared information, such as knowledge of Australian culture and pop-culture, geography, common slang, etc. This shared information would give them a base from which to start interacting with each other.

Common ground is said to be added to when the participants in an interaction satisfy the grounding criterion: "The contributor and the partners mutually believe that the partners have understood what the contributor meant to a criterion sufficient for current purposes" (Clark & Schaefer, 1989, p.262). That is to say, if the person who says something (the contributor) and the partners (those listening) believe that all concerned have sufficiently understood what has been said, then that information could be said to have satisfied the grounding criterion, and therefore can be added to the participant's pool of shared knowledge, or common ground. It is important to note that to add to the common ground, the participants do not necessarily have to be completely confident that their messages were fully understood, which might well be impossible; the participants merely have to believe that they have sufficient understanding.

People try to achieve the grounding criterion by showing each other positive evidence of understanding, which Clark (1996) says comes in four main types: *Assertions of understanding*, *presuppositions of understanding*, *displays of understanding*, and *exemplifications of understanding*. *Assertions of understanding* include comments like "Yes, yes", "I see", nodding, etc; *presuppositions of understanding* are where someone takes verbal or non-verbal action as if they understand; *displays of understanding* are where somebody takes verbal or non-verbal action and, by doing so, shows understanding; finally, *exemplifications of understanding* are where someone shows direct understanding of what someone said via verbatim repetition, paraphrasing, etc. (Clark, 1996).

While the four types of evidence described above provide positive evidence of understanding, some types of positive evidence of understanding may provide more conclusive evidence of understanding than others. Specifically, Clark (1996) mentions that assertions and presuppositions of understanding may not provide evidence as compelling as displays or exemplifications of understanding; after all, it is easy enough to assert that you understand, or take action as if you understand, even if you do not understand at all. However, repeating or explaining what someone said in your own words necessitates a certain amount of understanding. It is important to point out, though, that this does not necessarily indicate that participants in an interaction should use only displays and exemplifications of understanding; as described earlier, the participants merely have to believe that there is *sufficient* understanding. As such, it seems that participants only provide or look for their partners to provide only as much evidence as is necessary, as is expressed by Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs (1986) in what they call the *principle of least collaborative effort*.

Finally, as discussed in Nakashima & Hine (2021), while very proficient users of a language might require less evidence of positive evidence to satisfy the grounding criterion due to their confidence in shared knowledge, including vocabulary, language usage, etc., *learners* of a language might well be required to provide more evidence of positive evidence because of less mutual confidence in their knowledge of the L2 in question. In other words, while showing positive evidence of understanding seems to be an important part of communication in L1, it might well be of even more importance for communication in L2.

1.2 Grounding as it appears in the junior high school curriculum

As discussed in Nakashima & Hine (2021), some sections of the Japanese elementary school English language curriculum seem to feature inferences to something like the concept of grounding. The Japanese junior high school curriculum contains similar references, such as the following passage.

If the activity is a speaking or listening activity, *'while showing consideration' for the listener, reader, speaker, and/or writer* could be considered to mean speaking while checking the other party's understanding, listening while responding empathetically to what the other party said, etc. In contrast to the phrase *'showing consideration to the other party'* used for elementary school subject foreign language, the phrase *'showing consideration to the listener, reader, speaker, or writer'* is used for junior high school. This is due to the emphasis placed on a balanced fostering of the abilities/qualities over five areas of communication at junior high school, and language activities that integrate those five areas of communication.

(MEXT, 2017, p.15-16)

As can be seen, the junior high school curriculum explicitly talks about "checking your (communication) partner's understanding while speaking" and "responding empathetically" during oral communication. In regard to checking a communication partner's understanding, that could refer to somebody monitoring the positive evidence of understanding that the communication partner is providing. As for responding empathetically to what someone says, this could refer to assertions of understanding such as "Yes, yes", etc. This passage does not, however, mention other forms of positive evidence. It is also important to notice that while the elementary school curriculum talks only about oral communication in the corresponding passage, the junior high school curriculum adds written communication.

It seems the emphasis the ministry of education seems to place on showing or checking for positive evidence of understanding is not only limited to elementary school, but also applies to its thinking/wishes in regard to English language classes conducted at the junior high school level.

1.3 Retell: exemplifications of understanding in English language textbooks

Nakashima & Hine (2021) discussed the idea that having elementary school students show positive evidence of understanding to one another during student-student (st-st.) interactions would also make evidence of understanding visible to teachers. It seems that this concept has also been incorporated into the structure of Sunshine, one of the Japanese government approved junior high-school English textbooks, specifically in the activity named *'retell'*.

Retellings are "oral or written postreading recalls during which children relate what they can remember from reading or listening to particular text" (Moss, 2004, p.711), and *retell activities* as they appear in Sunshine seem to be based on this widely known technique. This can be seen from the various explanations, provided by the textbook company that publish Sunshine, in which retell activities are said to task students with describing the content of a written text to their classmates using their own words (Kairyudo, n.d.). In a related article that discusses the merits of retell activities, Ushiro (n.d.) proposes that they have the advantage of allowing people to judge not only how much someone has understood an English text, but also whether that someone has grasped the main points of the text.

As such, retell activities could then be said to include elements of the concept of grounding. Firstly, as students talk about the content of a text in their own words, it could be said that they are showing *exemplifications of understanding*, one of the aforementioned types of evidence of understanding as described by Clark (1996). Secondly, the act of judging how much someone has understood something

could be described as part of the process of achieving confidence in mutual understanding, albeit in this case of a text produced by an absent author. Of course, retell activities by themselves could not be considered a comprehensive implementation of the concept of grounding in English language classrooms; however, it is worth noting that textbooks are encouraging students to show positive evidence of understanding.

2. Implications of grounding in the junior high school English language classroom

Understanding the theory of grounding, and how it may be alluded to by MEXT in the curriculum is all well and good; however, it may mean little to teachers working hard on the front line to deliver a quality education to their students. In this section, we will look at how the concept of 'grounding' can apply to the interactions between st-st. interactions in a Japanese junior high school English language classroom.

2.1 The importance of st-st. interactions

Firstly, it seems important to discuss the importance of st-st. interactions to English language communication classes. While interactions between teacher and students (t-st(s) interactions) are surely necessary to a certain extent in any language classroom, it may not be an understatement to say that ideal oral communication classes are those that use t-st(s). interactions mainly as a vehicle to get to st-st. interactions. In fact, the latest elementary school and junior high school curriculums seem to place emphasis on interaction, as can be seen from the following passage, taken from an overview of MEXT.

“MEXT has been endeavoring to surely foster competencies that will be required in the future through lesson improvement from the perspective of proactive, interactive and authentic learning (so-called active learning)... ” (MEXT, 2021, p.8)

'Interactive' is the keyword here; however, 'active learning' is also worth noting. Active learning is a buzzword that is talked about at schools and, in the author's experience, is taken by front-line teachers to mean classes that feature more interaction via group-work, pair-work, etc.

However, even from a common-sense point of view, it makes sense to place emphasis on interactions and, in particular, st-st. interactions. Logistically speaking, there is usually only one teacher for each group of 30 or more students; if a teacher were to rely exclusively on individual interactions performed with each student, there would be little time a teacher would be able to dedicate to each interaction, and thus to each student. Scrivener (2011) suggests “When you are teaching a language, the priority is for the learners to talk, rather than the teacher” (p.35), and while Scrivener seems to be referring to teaching small groups that allow for more time to be devoted to interactions with individual students, surely the principle applies to larger groups, too. Ellis (1991) also weighs in on this topic, suggesting that “In the case of naturalistic acquisition, the importance of face-to-face interaction with other speakers of the L2 is self-evident” (p.1).

Of course, it is prudent to be careful when suggesting that st-st. interaction in and of itself is a direct cause of language acquisition. This is succinctly expressed by Gass, Mackey, and Pica (1998), who write “Although interaction may provide a structure that allows input to become salient and therefore noticed, interaction should not be seen as a cause of acquisition; it can only set the scene for potential learning” (p.305).

In conclusion, while perhaps not being the direct cause of language acquisition, st-st. interactions

surely provide more opportunity for students to acquire language.

2.2 Review of the practical application of grounding at elementary school

Although the focus of this paper is junior high school, it is also important to note that students in Japanese schools start studying English in elementary school; as such, before discussing the practical application of grounding in junior high school English language classes, it seems necessary to review the practical application of grounding at the elementary school level in order to establish context. For an extended explanation, please see Nakashima & Hine (2021).

The first thing of import to note is the fact that although the curriculum for grade 5 and 6 elementary school students incorporates some reading and writing, the focus is more on verbal communication; as such, when considering the practical application of grounding at elementary school, it will naturally focus more on verbal communication.

As is suggested in Nakashima & Hine (2021), practical grounding at the elementary school level might take one of two basic forms: initiating a side sequence (Jefferson, 1972) to confirm understanding of vocabulary items, or initiating a next relevant turn that progresses an interaction. The following is an example of the sort of side-sequence that might be incorporated into elementary school English language classes.

A: "Chicken."

B: "Chicken?" *chicken gesture, pointing at picture of chicken, etc.*

A: "Yes."

This could be part of a longer interaction about, for example, foods that each other likes; however, it might simply be a communication activity designed to establish the target vocabulary set as common ground for the class. Once the target vocabulary set has been established as common ground, an interaction that incorporates the target vocabulary set and also a simple but relevant question or statement that can serve to move the interaction forward. The following is an example of just such an interaction.

A: "So... do you like chicken?"

B: "Yes, I do/ A little / Really?"

A: "Me, too/Cool/Really?" *relevant statement*

or A: "Chicken Nanban (a popular Japanese chicken dish)?" *relevant question*

To reiterate, side sequences that seek to confirm understanding are more likely to be of use toward the start of a chapter of study, when the vocabulary set that the students will be using may not yet be part of the common ground that is shared by the class as a whole. Relevant next turns, however, are more likely to be of use after the vocabulary set is established as common ground; after all, it might be difficult for students to perform a relevant next turn without first being confident of the meaning of the target vocabulary the other party is conveying to them.

As can be deduced, the establishing of vocabulary sets as common ground before performing communication activities that include relevant next turns aims to increase the chance of students being able to experience successful communication and, hopefully, increase confidence in their own ability to communicate. This is because, in the author's experience, a certain amount of time is spent at elementary school in order to equip students with something reasonably close to what Clark and Clark (1977) call an *ideal delivery*: a pronunciation that is fluent, correct, and optimal for identification (as cited in Clark,

1994).

2.3 Practical application of grounding at junior high school

Now that we have established context, it is time to discuss how the practical application of grounding for communication at junior high school is similar to its elementary school counterpart, and how it may need to differ.

2.3.1 Establishing common ground with more efficiency

As mentioned in 2.2, a regular chapter flow as executed in an elementary school English language class might start with the establishment of the target vocabulary as common ground, before using it in verbal interactions that include some sort of relevant next turn in order to progress the interaction in some way. This might take place over three or four hours of study. However, the question that immediately comes to mind is how English teachers at junior high school can most efficiently establish the target vocabulary, grammar, etc. as common ground. After all, teachers have to cover a lot more ground in junior high school English language classes and may not have the luxury of time which elementary school English language teachers enjoy.

One possible solution would be to conduct activities during class that feature st-st. interactions comprised of simple side-sequences such as those mentioned in 2.2; that is to say, one solution would be to try the same methods as can be employed at elementary school. There is no reason to suspect that junior high school students would not be able to establish a relevant vocabulary set as common ground via simple communication activities. In fact, if students experience similar communication activities during their time at elementary school, it seems possible that they may be able to establish a relevant vocabulary set as common ground in a shorter time. However, the human brain has limits, and students may require multiple exposures in order to absorb new vocabulary items. This, in turn, might eat into class time needed for other purposes.

A solution that may help students to achieve these multiple exposures without using up precious class time unnecessarily is the preparation of appropriate homework to help students preview the vocabulary set before solidifying that knowledge in a communication activity like the one mentioned in the previous paragraph. Such homework might feature exercises that promote listening comprehension, during which students might have to listen to recorded audio, select the appropriate graphic, and check the answer via answer key. Similar exercises are included in most language textbooks; however, they often seem to cover only a very limited number of vocabulary items, presumably because they are designed to be used during class.

The two solutions offered in the previous paragraphs might be about as much as most junior high school English language teachers could realistically manage; in fact, the creation of custom homework exercises might be a bridge too far for all but the most keen of educators. However, it may be possible to go further. In order to establish the relevant vocabulary as common ground, and free up even more class time for more meaningful st-st. interaction, the ideal situation would be to use some sort of digital materials that would allow students to practice not only listening comprehension, but also pronunciation of vocabulary items. The author has not heard of such digital materials being used widely at Japanese junior high schools; however, there is a possibility that such digital materials could someday become available in schools, due to advancements in the field of speech recognition (SR) software.

SR software is now part of our everyday lives. For example, Apple devices feature Siri, a virtual assistant that you can verbally interact with on a limited basis, and Microsoft have a similar virtual

assistant called Cortana. Moreover, although SR software seemed more like a novelty feature when it first arrived on the scene, it might just hold some serious potential for English language classrooms of the future. In regard to studies relevant to the use of SR in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms conducted thus far, Vu L., Thibeault, and Vu P. (2021) say the following.

In summary, while expressing some concerns about SR limitations in its early versions, researchers and educators in the field of EFL/ESL seemed to agree that SR technology has potential in EFL/ESL. It is also noticed in the literature that over the years reports on SR adoption with positive impacts were more dominant. (p.70)

Vu L., Thibeault, and Vu P. go on to suggest that SR could have significant impact on students' EFL/ESL performance if appropriately implemented (p.73), and this seems fair. Of course, it may not serve as a complete substitute for real person-person interaction. However, providing a 'virtual communication partner' for students to practice with could really help students establish relevant vocabulary, phrases, grammar, etc. as common ground for the whole class before interpersonal communication activities are conducted. If all the students practice using the same software and are able to be graded as having a certain level of ability, the class as a whole should feel comfortable considering the content covered as common ground.

2.3.2 Deliberately limiting common ground for the sake of authenticity

In 2.3.1, several solutions were offered for teachers wanting to establish target vocabulary sets and grammar as common ground to increase the chance of students experiencing interactions that feature very little misunderstanding. However, once a learning group has experienced a sufficient amount of obstacle-free communication, it may be a good idea for the teacher to purposely fail to fully establish the relevant vocabulary set, grammar, interaction etc. as common ground before performing communication activities. While teachers, including the author, feel the urge to enable students to communicate without unnecessary misunderstandings, there is no getting around the fact that the students will be required in the real world to perform interactions that are not guaranteed to be perfect. If teachers are to be successful in preparing them for communication in real life, as is our goal, it would seem necessary to have students practice performing interactions during which they may have to focus more on dealing with problems in communication.

2.3.3 Strategies when faced with potential problems in communication

In regard to how students might deal with problems during interactions, Clark (1994) proposes that the following three strategies are used: *preventatives*, *warnings*, and *repairs*.

Preventatives, according to Clark (1994), are used to deal with problems that are anticipated and avoidable; they might include making sure someone is paying attention before trying to convey something to them, or people self-correcting after realising that they had said the wrong thing before a problem occurs.

Clark (1994) describes *warnings* as strategies used when faced with problems that are anticipated but unavoidable, and might include using fillers such as "uh" or "um" in order to warn their communication partner(s) of an inappropriate but unavoidable pause in the message, caused perhaps by a lack of ability to formulate multiple phrases before speaking.

Finally, *repairs* are explained by Clark (1994) as to be used to deal with problems that have already appeared, and might include repeating something that was seemingly misheard, or explaining something that was seemingly misunderstood.

It is advisable that educators take a balanced approach when conducting instruction in these strategies; however, it may just be that people are more likely to favour not having to repair if at all possible. Clark (1994) likens conversation to medicine, saying "In conversation as in medicine, people prefer preventatives to warnings, and warnings to repairs, all other things being equal" (p.245).

In regard to preventatives, though, educators could simply have students make sure that their communication partner(s) are in a position to receive a message before trying to convey one. Also, educators could make students aware that they should not just forget about the words they convey as soon as they leave their mouths; rather, they should monitor their output and, if a potential problem is detected, deal with it before it requires more serious repair.

In regard to warnings, perhaps it would be a start if students were taught to use fillers when they know there will be an unavoidable pause in their messages. The *Filler-as-word Hypothesis* (Clark and Fox Tree, 2002), might help with the distinction that needs to be made between the use of 'uh' vs 'um'.

Filler-as-word Hypothesis. *Uh* and *um* are interjections whose basic meanings are these:

- a) *Uh*: "Used to announce the initiation, at t('uh'), of what is expected to be a minor delay in speaking."
- b) *Um*: "Used to announce the initiation, at t('um'), of what is expected to be a major delay in speaking."

(Clark and Fox Tree, 2002, p.79)

In other words, if students anticipate a short delay before they are able to continue conveying something, they should use 'Uh'; if a longer delay is anticipated, they should use 'Um'.

3. Outlook for the future

The concept of grounding seems able to provide clues and guidance to English language educators in both Japanese elementary and junior high schools. Of course, it may not provide answers for all the questions that teachers must have in regard to language learning; however, in the author's opinion, it provides a relatively simple perspective on interpersonal interactions which teachers can use to guide their thinking when planning and conducting English language classes. Moreover, the author thinks it could provide a solid theoretical framework that English teachers working at Japanese junior high schools can use to help organise the practical experience they will gain in the classroom.

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