

An A-Z of Common English Errors for Japanese Learners—Teacher’s Guide

Introduction

An A-Z of Common English Errors for Japanese Learners is a straightforward concept that requires little explanation beyond that given in the introduction. The basic structure of the book is that a key word or phrase is followed by an example of a common mistake, the appropriate correction(s), and a Japanese explanation of the relevant point of grammar or usage. (Warning triangles are used for sentences that whilst not necessarily wrong, are often used incorrectly by Japanese learners of English.) Most of the explanations go far beyond the correction of the mistake itself, particularly in the case of more complicated areas of grammar such as tense usage.

Selection of Key Words

The selection of words to represent the different errors was one of the most difficult parts of writing this book. In the case of mistakes like *play with my friends* (play), the choice of key word was fairly obvious, but in many cases, it was more complex. For example, should *go to shopping* be listed under “go,” “to,” or “shopping”? In selecting the key words and phrases, I chose the ones that best encapsulate each mistake for me. Of course, this might be different for other teachers, which is why the index includes examples of the mistakes represented by each key word or phrase. Another problem was binary distinctions such as “by/ until.” For these kinds of mistakes, entries for both words have been included in the index.

In order to ensure that both you and your students get the most out of this book, you will need to spend some time reading over the index in order to familiarize yourself with its contents. I hope you will find, however, that this effort is rewarded when you find yourself able to refer students to the appropriate sections without even having to look at the book. Teachers who have used the book at my own university said that it took them a couple of weeks to get a good feeling for how mistakes are categorized, but that once they had, dealing with errors became extremely easy and economical.

Here is one suggestion for a way of familiarizing yourself with the book:

1. Look at the mistakes on the cover of the book. Jot down some key words that you think they might be listed under, and then check the index to see if you can find them. Make a note of the ones that you cannot find.
2. Make a list of five other mistakes that you often notice your students making. Think about the key words you would expect to find these mistakes listed under, and check the index. Make a note of the ones you cannot find.
3. Read through the key word index. Look at the examples for each key word or phrase. Try to find the mistakes you were not able to find in steps 1 and 2 above. Make a note of the key word or phrase they are listed under.
4. Read through the index again and highlight the key words that represent the mistakes you most often notice students making.

5. Remind yourself of the contents of the book by reading over the index every few days at the beginning of the semester. If you follow these steps, you should find that within a week or so you will be able instantly to direct students to the appropriate part(s) of the books for the majority of the most common mistakes. (Note: to avoid the necessity of teachers having to carry around a heavy book and continually refer to its index, a pull-out card index of just the key words and the mistakes they represent is available free of charge.)

How to Use the Book

An A-Z of Common English Errors for Japanese Learners was written to enable teachers of English who either cannot, prefer not to, or simply do not have time to provide Japanese explanations of English grammar and usage in their classrooms. The book can be used in one of two ways. Firstly, it can be used as a reference when teachers notice students making mistakes or struggling with particular areas of grammar or usage. Secondly, it can be used as a syllabus by having students go through the workbook section at the back. Ideally, the book should be used in both ways to ensure that students get the maximum benefit from it.

Using the Book to Deal with Individual Mistakes

When I originally wrote the book, one of the key ideas was that teachers of writing classes would be able to simply write the appropriate key word(s) on a student's paper and leave them to read the explanation and correct the mistake themselves. In practice, however, some of the key phrases are quite long, and writing them out can be time-consuming. To remedy this, a colleague suggested making a single A4 sheet containing all of the key words. This can be downloaded from the home page (Key Word List). Give a copy of this list to each student, and ask them to write their names on it and submit it with their written work. You can then simply underline the key words you want them to read as you notice mistakes in the assignment. If each student keeps their paper and hands it in with every new assignment, it will provide an ongoing record of what mistakes they have made (and what grammar points they have read about) over the course of the semester. In speaking classes, students can leave this paper on their table as they practice so that you can underline key words as you pick up on mistakes when monitoring their conversations.

Using the Workbook as a Grammar Syllabus

Using the book in this way simply means setting exercises in class or for homework and asking the students to read the explanations and correct the mistakes. It is important to remember that some of the explanations are very short whilst others take up several pages. For this reason, small "egg timer" symbols are given with each question to provide a rough guide as to how much homework you are setting. One symbol represents roughly five minutes of reading time for the students. When assigning homework, it is therefore better to think in terms of the number of symbols you are setting than the number of exercises.

One system that my colleagues and I have found to be very effective is putting students into pairs or groups of three and assigning different exercises to each student. For example, in Section 1 of the workbook (a nice one to use as an introduction) you could set question 1 for "A" students, questions 2 and 3 for "B" students, and questions 4 and 5 for "C" students.

(This would mean requiring each student to do two “egg timers’ worth”, or approximately ten minutes, of reading.) In the following lesson, each student would then have to teach the other members of their group what they learned, and show them how to correct the mistakes. It is a good idea to put groups of the same letters together to check that they have the correct answers before they start. The answers to the exercises can be downloaded from the home page.

Students seem to enjoy explaining grammar and usage to each other, and setting the class up in this way means that even very weak students are motivated to participate fully. It is a simple matter for teachers to construct either weekly and/or final tests by changing some key words in the workbook exercises.

How do you say this in English?

Any teacher who has experience of teaching Japanese students will know that, quite naturally, they wonder about the English translations of the kinds of fixed expressions that are so important in their own language. The one I am most commonly asked about is *itadakimasu*, but there are many others. The section entitled “How do you say this in English?” provides students with an explanation of why it is often not possible (or appropriate) to translate fixed expressions from one language into another. Following that explanation is a list of the expressions that students most commonly ask about, together with suggestions of English expressions that convey a similar meaning and notes on how they are used. This section makes an ideal starting point for an English course, as well as a useful orientation to some key principles of language learning.

Introduction for Students

The purpose of the introduction for students beginning on page eight is to stress that mistakes can actually be a valuable resource in the learning of a foreign language. At the same time, however, it explains that feeling embarrassed when you make mistakes is a very natural emotion, and one with which most teachers are just as familiar as their students. You may find it useful to ask your students to read this introduction at the beginning of the course. It can then be used as a jumping-off point for a discussion on how they feel about making mistakes in English. A translation is provided below.

Finally, as I mention in the introduction to the book, I am quite aware that there are many more mistakes that could usefully be added to the ones I have listed. If you have any suggestions for additions to future versions, or if you have any ideas about how the book can be used with specific types of students or in particular classes, please let me know.

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