

BIG DIPPER Writing Course

— a star performer

T. D. Minton

The problems anyone has in learning a foreign language stem, of course, entirely from the differences between the target language and their own. Just as obviously, the more different two languages are, the more difficult it will be for speakers of one to learn the other. And it is well known that English and Japanese are poles apart! Unfortunately, the problems that this vast gulf presents to learners are exacerbated by the tendency, natural though it may be, of students to underestimate or even ignore the differences when they seem irrelevant to their own language. An English-speaking student of elementary Japanese might, for example, consider different Japanese verb endings (*e.g.* 行きます vs. 行く) unimportant, as they make no difference to how the verbs would be translated into English. For the same reason, it is tempting for Japanese students of elementary English to consider, for example, the differences between the various English forms for talking about the future (*will, be doing, etc.*) fundamentally irrelevant. Similar observations could be made about other English verb tenses, particularly the perfect tenses: since they do not exist in the Japanese language, they seem less significant to many students than they really are. Even when particular forms have “equivalents” in the other language, there are often huge differences in usage. The passive voice is a good example: just because a passive form is appropriate to express a certain idea in Japanese, it does not automatically follow that it is going to be appropriate in English, or *vice versa*.

Big Dipper Writing Course seeks to help students overcome such hurdles through

systematic and efficient practice in writing on a wide variety of interesting topics, offering them guidance in every aspect of English writing from simple affirmative/negative sentence patterns through to basic paragraph writing. It is an unashamedly grammar-based book, as any language textbook for beginners or near beginners with limited exposure to the target language should be. The grammatical approach to language learning seems to be rather unfashionable in Japan, but this is probably thanks largely to a fundamental misconception of what grammar is. To the majority of Japanese, it means the rote memorization of boring and often seemingly arbitrary and contradictory rules. What grammar actually is, though, is an intellectually stimulating and rewarding attempt to find structure in what would otherwise be largely gibberish, thereby making a language easier, or at least less confusing, to learn. After a certain age, trying to learn a foreign language without learning how it is structured (*i.e.* without studying its grammar) is like trying to write a symphony without any instruction in composition—one in ten million people might be able to do it, but the rest are doomed to failure.

Big Dipper Writing Course also recognizes that dealing with specific language skills in isolation is not generally a good idea. Certainly, it is primarily a writing textbook, but if used as we intend, it also offers practice in reading, listening and speaking through a variety of stimulating exercises. We are confident that both you and your students will find *Big Dipper Writing Course* easy to use, pleausrably challenging, and highly rewarding.

(日本医科大学准教授)