

## **Time Matters in Japanese Teaching Materials**

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### **Abstract**

There have been several studies that debate the status of the *-ru* and *-ta* verbal morphemes as tense and/or aspect markers. The intertwined nature of these morphemes in the denotation of tense and aspect make it not only difficult for the learners to disambiguate their complex relationships, but also challenging for the instructors to explain the phenomenon in pedagogical language. The use and interpretation of these morphemes are crucial in teaching Japanese because incorrect choices may hinder or distort communication between learners and speakers of Japanese. The present study sets out to examine seven Japanese language textbooks for presentation patterns of the *-ru/-ta* morphemes. The study also suggests application exercises that specifically target the teaching of tense-aspect ambiguity in Japanese language classrooms.

### **1. Introduction**

There has been a long standing debate concerning the status of Japanese tense and aspect and the role of the verbal suffixes *-ta* and *-ru*<sup>(1)</sup> that index them. These two morphemes are frequently glossed as past and non-past tenses, respectively mainly because they refer to these tenses in mono-clausal isolated sentences (Hasegawa 1998). However, both morphemes can be used to refer to situations in past, present and future time (Kunihiro 1967). The following examples illustrate Kunihiro's claims. Example (3) is from Suzuki (1965) and (4) is from Kunihiro (1967).

Table 1: Tense uses of *-ta* and *-ru* morphemes

	<i>-ta</i> form	<i>-ru</i> form
PAST	(1) tomodati ni tegami o kai- <b>ta</b> . 'I wrote a letter to my friend.'	(4) omae wa ore o hontoo ni baka ni su- <b>ru</b> ne. 'You really made a fool of me, didn't you?'
PRESENT	(2) nodo ga kawai- <b>ta</b> . 'I am thirsty.'	(5) yakusoku su- <b>ru</b> . 'I promise.'
FUTURE	(3) yosi, kat- <b>ta</b> . 'Ok, I am going to buy (that).'	(6) rainen nihon ni ik- <b>u</b> . 'I'll go to Japan next year.'

Another piece of evidence that *-ru* and *-ta* are not always necessarily associated with non-past and past tense can be found in the bi-clausal sentences below.<sup>(2)</sup>

(7) hanako ga ku-**ru** maeni taroo wa kooen de hasit-**ta**.  
NOM come-NON PAST before TOP park in run-PAST  
'Taro ran in the park **before** Hanako came.'

(8) hanako ga ki-**ta** ato de taroo ga hasi-**ru** yotee da.  
NOM come-PAST after NOM run-NON PAST plan COP  
'Taro plans to run **after** Hanako comes.'

Although the overall tense in (7) is past as denoted by *-ta* in the main verb *hasit-ta* 'ran,' the subordinate verb *ku-ru* 'come' takes the non-past ending *-ru*. This is because the semantics of the conjunction *mae* 'before' allows only the non-past *-ru* ending in verbs that precede it. A similar constraint exists in case of the conjunction *ato* 'after' that only allows the use of the *-ta* ending in the verbs that precede it. As seen in (8) the tense ending of the subordinate verb *ki-ta* 'came' runs contrary to the overall tense of the sentence denoted by the main verb *hasi-ru* 'run.'

Evidently it is difficult to explain the difference between the usages of *-ru* and *-ta* on the basis of form alone, and the learners of Japanese often find it puzzling, and understandably so, to choose the appropriate suffix and make the following type of production error (from Netsu 1984).

- (9) \*kuruma ga kosyoo su-**ru** toki, taroo ni naosite morau.  
car NOM break down-NON PAST when by repair receive  
'I'll have Taro fix my car, when it breaks down.'

The verb in the subordinate *toki* clause *kosyoo su-* 'to break down' has to take place prior to the event in the main clause *naosite mora-u* 'have it fixed.' Therefore, the correct morpheme is *-ta* as in *kosyoo si-ta* 'already broke down.' However, the learners choose *-ru* as in (9) and Netsu (1984) attributes this type of error to the effect of native language transfer.

The use and interpretation of the *-ru* and *-ta* endings are crucial in teaching Japanese because these verbal morphemes are the basic building blocks that govern the concept of time in Japanese language. The data above shows the ambiguous nature of these morphemes both in mono-clausal and bi-clausal instances. Due to these ambiguities, teachers of Japanese language may find it challenging to explain the concepts of tense and aspect to the students. Most teachers often rely on textbook materials to teach these concepts. In order to gain insight into a systematic way of teaching about tense and aspect, and more broadly time expressions, it is necessary to examine and evaluate how these concepts are currently being presented in textbooks.

The goal of this study is two-fold. First, to examine and evaluate seven popularly used Japanese language textbooks to look for presentation patterns of tense and aspect concepts. And second, to suggest sample exercises that specifically target the teaching of tense-aspect ambiguity, and that can usefully supplement the currently used teaching materials. Before pursuing the goals of this paper in sections 3 and 4, the Japanese tense and aspect system will be introduced briefly in section 2.

## **2. Background**

### **2.1 Tense and aspect**

According to Comrie (1976), "tense locates a situation in time with respect to some base reference point (such as the speech time) and looks at relative sequential ordering between the two time points," while aspect is defined as

“different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.” In other words, tense is identified as viewing an event as a point on the timeline following a chronological (before/after) sequence with respect to the speech time or the time of the main event (in a bi-clausal sentence). Whereas, aspect is identified by viewing the constituents of a situation internally, that is, by locating a point within an event close to the beginning, in the middle or close to the end.

Shirai & Anderson (1995) illustrate the tense and aspect difference using the following examples from Comrie (1976). The difference between *he is eating* and *he was eating* is that of tense, since the *is/was* contrast signifies the difference between the two in relation to speech time. The difference between *he ate bread* and *he was eating bread*, however, is that of aspect, since the difference is about how the action of eating is viewed by the speaker; the former views the situation in its entirety (external view), while the latter views the situation as consisting of phases (internal view). While tense characterizes events on the timeline with specific reference to their occurrences before or after particular points of reference, aspect characterizes events in terms of their simultaneity relations (simultaneous overlap) within a specific phase or interval.

## 2.2 Japanese tense-aspect markers

As stated earlier, Japanese is often said to have a past (*-ta*) and a non-past (*-ru*) tense marker. Although the past tense marker can be attached to any verb without any systematic restriction (Shirai 1998), it is often considered to have a sense of ‘perfect’ or ‘perfective’ (see (10) below). According to Horie (1997), this may be because *-ta* is still in the process of grammaticizing from a perfect marker into a perfective aspect marker and then into a simple past tense marker. Due to this transitional nature of the Japanese past tense marker, there have been disagreements on whether the past tense marker *-ta* is an aspect marker or a tense marker (Takahashi 1976; Hasegawa 1998). In (10) *-ta* indicates that the *going* is realized (perfective) and places this realization before speech time (past tense).

- (10) taroo wa kinoo gakkoo e it-**ta**. (past/perfective)  
TOP yesterday school to go-PAST  
'Taro **went** to school yesterday.'

The non-past form *-ru* normally refers to present state with stative verbs and to future action or habitual action with dynamic verbs.

- (11) yakusoku ga a-**ru**. (present)  
appointment NOM have-NON PAST  
'I **have** an appointment.'

- (12) taroo wa mainiti gakkoo e ik-**u**. (habitual)  
TOP everyday school to go-NON PAST  
'Taro **goes** to school every day.'

- (13) taroo wa asita gakkoo e ik-**u**. (future)  
TOP tomorrow school to go-NON PAST  
'Taro **will go** to school tomorrow.'

With regards to aspect, Japanese has an obligatory durative imperfective aspect construction *-te i* which must be used if referring to action in progress at the reference time. However, the unique feature of *-te i* is that it combines the notion of perfective and imperfective. That is, when it is attached to durative verbs, it denotes a progressive reading, which is a type of imperfective. However, when it is attached to punctual verbs, it denotes a resultative reading, which is closely associated with perfective (Shirai & Kurono 1998).

- (14) kinoo kuzi ni gohan o tabe-**te ita**. (progressive)  
yesterday 9 o'clock at food ACC eat-PAST PROG  
'Yesterday at 9 o'clock, I **was eating** dinner.'

- (15) kinoo kuzi ni taroo ga tui-**te ita**. (resultative)  
yesterday 9 o'clock NOM reach-PAST RESULT  
'Yesterday, at 9 o'clock, Taro **had reached** (somewhere).'

Additionally *-te i* can give resultative readings with durative verbs as well, as in (16) and (17) below.

- (16) kono goro konpyuutaa o tukat-**te iru.** (resultative)  
 these days computers ACC use-NON PAST PROG  
 ‘I **am using** computers these days.’
- (17) ken wa nihon e it-**te iru.** (resultative)  
 TOP to go-NON PAST RESULT  
 ‘Ken **has gone** to Japan.’

It is because of these unique features of *-te i* that it has become the central issue of investigation in most studies related to acquisition of aspect in Japanese second language acquisition.

Besides the progressive and resultative readings, another reading of *-ta* and *-te i* reported in Shirai (2002) is habituality. In Japanese, a habituality reading is possible with both past tense and progressive/durative marking as shown in the examples below.

- (18) ken wa mainiti hasit-**ta.** (habitual)  
 TOP everyday run-PAST  
 ‘Ken **ran** every day.’
- (19) ken wa saikin hasit-**te iru.** (habitual)  
 TOP these days run-NON PAST PROG  
 ‘Ken **is running** these days.’

### 2.3 Ambiguity of *-ru* and *-ta* as tense and/or aspect markers

As illustrated by the examples (1)-(6) in section 1, Kunihiro (1967: 56-68) lists the uses of *-ta* and *-ru* morphemes that includes past, present and future for both morphemes in independent clauses. In the case of multi-clausal sentences, Hasegawa (1998) gives a comprehensive review of competing analyses in previous studies with regards to indexing the two morphemes as (i) tense markers (e.g., Miura 1974; Soga 1983), (ii) aspect markers (e.g., Miller 1975), (iii) both tense and aspect markers (e.g., Teramura 1971; Nakau 1976), and (iv) neither tense nor aspect markers (e.g., Kunihiro 1967; Onoe 1995). In the case of Japanese, the aspectual analysis is predominant in explaining most of what is going on, but, “it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to abandon the linear

notion of time” (Hasegawa 1998) to interpret the choice of *-ru* and *-ta* morphemes in multi-clausal sentences.

In order to illustrate the ambiguous tense-aspect nature of the *-ru/-ta* morphemes, let us look at the following examples. Examples (20), (21) are from Tange (2004), and (22), (23) are from Kudo (1992).

(20) sarada o **tuku-ru** toki, tyanto te o araimasita ka.  
salad ACC make-NON PAST when properly hands ACC washed QP  
‘Did you wash your hands **before** making salad?’

(21) sarada o **tukut-ta** toki, tyanto te o araimasita ka.  
salad ACC make-PAST when properly hands ACC washed QP  
‘Did you wash your hands **before (or after)** making salad?’

In examples (20) and (21) *-ru* and *-ta* take the before and after interpretations which are characteristics of (relative) tense. The before/after ambiguity in (21) is removed by looking at the context in which these sentences are uttered.

(22) susi o **tuku-ru** toki, hootyoo de te o kitta. (=tukut-**te iru**)  
susi ACC make-NON PAST when knife with hand ACC cut  
‘I cut my hand with a knife when I **was making** susi.’

(23) inaka ni kaet-**ta** toki, guuzen kyuuyuu ni atta. (=kaet-**te iru**)  
home to return -PAST when by chance old friend with met  
‘I met my old friend by chance when I **had returned** home.’

In (22) and (23) both *-ru* and *-ta* can be replaced by the *-te iru* form representing the aspectual characteristic of simultaneity, indicating that the *-ru/-ta* in these sentences represent aspect.

Given the intertwined nature of tense and aspect in Japanese and multiple layers of interpretations in time related expressions, teachers of Japanese language are left with the daunting task of teaching these concepts to students using the available pedagogical materials, primarily textbooks. In the next section, an analysis of Japanese language textbooks will be presented that examines the role of pedagogical materials in the teaching of tense-aspect and of *-ru/-ta* in Japanese language classrooms.

### 3. Tense-aspect presentation in pedagogical materials

In this section seven Japanese language textbooks will be examined to look for presentation patterns of tense-aspect concepts as well as *-ru/-ta* morphemes.

#### 3.1 Analysis method

Seven Japanese language textbooks were selected (see Table 2). These textbooks are directed towards post-secondary learners of Japanese as a second or foreign language at the beginning and intermediate levels.

Each textbook was carefully examined to elucidate the presentation patterns in three main areas, namely: (a) terminology/definitions of tense-aspect related concepts, (b) tense and aspect related grammatical structures, and (c) constructs that display *-ru/-ta* contrasts. Henceforth, abbreviations given in the list below will be used to refer to the particular textbooks.

Table 2: Textbook selection (in alphabetical order)

Textbook Title/Year	Volumes/Chapters	Abbreviation
1. An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese: Genki (Banno et al. 1999)	2 vols./ 23 chaps.	GNK
2. Japanese: The Spoken Language I, II, III (Jordan & Noda 1987, 1988, 1990)	3 vols./ 30 chaps.	JSP
3. A Course in Modern Japanese: Beginning, Intermediate (Japanese Language Education Research Group 1983, 1989)	4 vols./ 42 chaps.	NGY
4. Nakama: Japanese Communication, Culture, Context (Makino, Hatasa & Hatasa 1998, 2000)	2 vols./ 22 chaps.	NKM
5. Situational Functional Japanese (Tsukuba Language Group 1991)	3 vols./ 24 chaps.	SFJ
6. Japanese: Beginning, Intermediate (Tokyo University of Foreign Studies Language Group 1990, 1994)	2 vols./ 28 chaps.	TKY
7. Yookoso (Tohsaku 1999, 2004)	2 vols./ 14 chaps.	YKS

#### 3.2 Definitions and terminologies

In order to find out how the textbooks introduced the terms and definitions for tense and aspect, all volumes of the textbooks were scanned closely to check for any explanations related to temporal (time) expressions. Table 3 below gives a summary of the findings.

Table 3: Definitions and terminologies

1. GNK GNK (L3: 60) states that “Present tense either means (1) that a person habitually or regularly engages in these activities or (2) that a person will, or is planning to perform these activities in the future.” <i>No similar definition is offered for past.</i>
2. JSP JSP (L1: 32) states that “Finished vs unfinished is the significant contrast in Japanese, whereas English speakers tend to think in terms of three time distinction—past, present and future.”
3. NGY NGY (Vol.3) gives a definition for tense (L1: 10) as well as aspect (L3: 68). “ <u>Tense</u> is a grammatical category which shows the time of the event being described by the verb. There are two ways to denote tense, “ <i>ru</i> ” (denoting present and future) and “ <i>ta</i> ” (denoting past) in simple sentences. However in subordinate clauses, the two kinds of verb endings denote completion or incompleteness. <u>Aspect</u> is defined as a category of the verb indicating primarily the relation of an action to the passage of time, especially with reference to completion, duration, repetition, etc.”
4. NKM NKM (L5: 144) states that “Japanese verbs have only two tenses, past and present. The present tense indicates present or future time, depending on the context.” <i>No similar definition is offered for past.</i>
5. SFJ SFJ (Introduction: 15) states that “A predicate inflects according to non-past and past.”
6. TKY Grammar notes unavailable at the time of study.
7. YKS YKS (L3: 187) states that “There are two basic tense – past and non-past. Past tense is used to express past actions or events. The non-past is used to express present, habitual and future actions.”

The majority of the textbooks choose to introduce mainly tense related terms (NKM, YKS, GNK, SFJ) with the exception of JSP (that chooses only aspect) and NGY (that introduces both). JSP chooses aspectual terms such as “perfective” and “imperfective” to refer to *-ta* and *-ru*. NKM uses “past” and “present” tense terminologies. YKS uses “past” and “non-past,” and GNK uses “present.” SFJ introduces the inflectional endings *-ru* and *-ta* as non-past and past.

It is interesting to find such a wide variation in the choice of these terms and that only one textbook chooses to introduce both tense and aspect. In the next section, it will be shown that it is important to introduce both tense and aspect as a precursor to effectively teach about *-ru/-ta* ambiguities.

### 3.3 Tense and aspect-related expressions

This section will delineate the relationship between the *-ru/-ta* endings and various tense and aspect expressions that are introduced in the textbooks. It is essential to recognize this relationship in order to understand the tense-aspect ambiguity in Japanese.

As pointed out in previous studies (Comrie 1976; Shirai & Andersen 1995), tense refers to a sequential relationship between the time an event occurs and some other base reference point such as the time of utterance or the time of another event (e.g., *-ru mae* ‘before,’ *-ta ato* ‘after’). Aspect refers to taking an internal view of an event, that is, to see if the event has (i) just begun (e.g., verbal stem + *hajimeru/ dasu* ‘start of the verbal action’), (ii) is in progress (e.g., *-te iru* ‘ongoing’), or (iii) is completed (e.g., *-te simau* ‘finished’). Based on these distinctions, a list of selected tense and aspectual structures was constructed, and each of the textbooks was examined for the presence or absence of these structures. See Table 4 below.

Table 4: Selected tense and aspectual expressions

Tense-Aspectual Expressions	Examples	GNK	JSP	NGY	NKM	SFJ	TKY	YKS	% Ratio
<i>~ru mae</i>	<i>taberu mae ni iku.</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~ta ato</i>	<i>tabeta ato de iku.</i>	-	√	√	√	√	√	√	87 (6/7)
<i>~yoo to suru</i>	<i>tabeyoo to site iru.</i>	-	√	√	-	-	-	√	43 (3/7)
Stem + <i>hajimeru</i>	<i>kakihazimeru. ugokidasu.</i>	-	√	-	-	-	-	-	14 (1/7)
<i>~te iru</i>	<i>tabete iru.</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~te iru tokoro</i>	<i>tukatte iru tokoro</i>	-	√	√	-	√	√	√	71 (5/7)
<i>~te aru</i>	<i>tabete aru.</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~tyuu</i>	<i>syokuzi tyuu</i>	-	√	√	-	√	√	√	71 (5/7)
<i>~ru aida/aida ni</i>	<i>kiite iru aida/aida ni</i>	√	√	√	-	-	√	-	57 (4/7)
<i>~ru/~nai uti ni</i>	<i>rensyuu site iru uti ni/</i>	-	√	√	-	-	-	-	29 (2/7)

	<i>kaeranai uti ni</i>								
<i>~nagara</i>	<i>kikinagara~</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
Stem + <i>owaru/ oeru</i>	<i>kakiowaru. kakioeru.</i>	-	√	-	-	-	-	-	14 (1/7)
<i>~te simau</i>	<i>tabete simau.</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~te oku</i>	<i>katte oku.</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
Perfective in recall	<i>asita datta?</i>	-	√	√	-	-	-	-	29 (2/7)
<i>~tokoro da</i>	<i>iku/itta tokoro da.</i>	-	√	√	-	√	√	√	71 (5/7)
<i>toki</i>	<i>iku/itta toki</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~ta mama</i>	<i>haitta mama</i>	-	√	√	-	-	√	√	57 (4/7)
Time made/ <i>made ni</i>	<i>asita made/ made ni</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~ru made/made ni</i>	<i>kaeru made/made ni</i>	√	√	√	-	-	-	-	43 (3/7)
<i>~te kuru/~te iku</i>	<i>wakatte kuru/ huate iku</i>	-	√	√	-	-	√	√	57 (4/7)
<i>~ku/ni naru</i>	<i>ookiku naru/ kiree ni naru</i>	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	100 (7/7)
<i>~ru/~ta koto ga aru</i>	<i>taberu/ tabeta koto ga aru?</i>	√	√	√	√	√	-	√	87 (6/7)

Presentation: Of the items examined that marked tense and aspectual functions, it was seen that the expressions denoting relative tense (*-ru mae*, *-ta ato*) were present in most of the seven textbooks. However, there was a wide variation seen in the presentation of aspectual expressions. For example, structures such as *-te iru*, *-te aru*, *-te simau*, *-te oku*, *-toki*, *made*, *made ni* had a 100% representation. Structures such as *-tyuu*, *-tokoro da*, *-te iru tokoro* had a 70% representation and structures such as stem + *hazimeru*, stem + *owaru*, *-tutu aru*, perfective in recall had the least or no representation.

Explanations: For the tense structures (such as *-ru mae*, *-ta ato*), all textbooks that included them use tense related characteristics such as before and after. For the

aspectual structures (such as *-te iru*), all textbooks that included them use aspect related characteristics such as ongoing, continuous, resultant state, change of state, etc. What is missing across the board (except NGY) is that these characteristics are not identified as part of tense and/or aspect. Each time a new structure is introduced, it is explained using a list of tense and/or aspect characteristics, without mentioning the ‘parent’ category of Tense or Aspect. The advantage of identifying the parent categories in the beginning is that the incoming structures can be easily classified in one (or both) of two categories and can also be compared to previous members of the two parent categories. For example, when *toki* is introduced as a new structure, it can be described to have tense-like characteristics such as before/after for instantaneous verbs like *deru* (*de-ru/ta toki*, *hai-ru/ta toki*), and aspect-like characteristics such as ongoing, stative for durative verbs like *iru* (*i-ru/ta toki*). When such connections are made between *toki* (new structure) and the parent category, it becomes easier to see why the *-ru/-ta* morphemes in *toki* clauses have tense-aspect ambiguity. In other words, by identifying the parent categories, it is easier to (a) see how the characteristics of new structures relate to previously introduced structures in the Tense and Aspect parent categories, and (b) make predictions about tense aspect behaviors of any future, incoming structures based on the typical characteristics that they display.

In order to be able to assign the incoming structures to the two parent categories of Tense and Aspect, students need to know early on, what features constitute the tense and aspect-like characteristics. Depending on the level of the students, these characteristics can be introduced in small segments. A reference list for tense and aspectual characteristics with examples are given in section 4.1 under Tables 6, 7, and 8.

### **3.4 Structures displaying *-ru /-ta* contrasts**

To illustrate the interaction between the *-ru/-ta* endings and the tense-aspect concepts that they represent, it is essential to look at grammatical structures that allow both of these endings, hence displaying a *-ru/-ta* contrast. In order to do that,

a set of grammatical items were selected that formed meaningful interpretations with both *-ru* and *-ta* morphemes. The textbooks were then examined to check for the presence or absence of these structures with both *-ru* and *-ta* alternates. Some of the syntactic contexts that reveal *-ru/-ta* contrasts are nominal modification (e.g. *tukau/tukatta konpyuutaa* ‘a computer that I (will) use/ (have) used’), *-koto ga aru* (to express past experience/routine, as in *iku/itta koto ga aru* ‘there are occasions when [I] (will) go/ have gone,’ or *-no de* (causal circumstances, as in *iku/itta no de...* ‘Since [I] (will) go/ have gone...’).

The findings are tabulated in Table 5.

Table 5: *-Ru/-ta* contrasts [Adj=Adjectives]

Items/ <i>Examples</i>	GNK	JSP	NGY	NKM	SFJ	TKY	YKS	Ratio
Nominal Modifier <i>tukau/tukatta konpyuutaa</i>	ru ta √ √	7/7						
<i>toki iku/itta toki</i>	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	7/7
<i>n da aru/atta n da.</i>	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	7/7
<i>no (koto) yomu/yonda no(koto)...</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	6/7
<i>tokoro taberu/tabeta tokoro</i>	- -	√ √	√ √	- -	√ √	√ √	√ √	5/7
<i>kara iku/itta kara</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	- √	5/7
<i>no ni iku/itta no ni</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	- √	√ √	5/7
<i>tame naru/natta tame</i>	- -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ -	√ √	5/7
<i>rasii waku/wakatta rasii</i>	- -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	Adj √	√ √	5/7
<i>kamosirenai iku/itta kamosirenai.</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ -	√ √	5/7
<i>hazu iu/itta hazu</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ -	√ -	4/7
<i>to omou taberu/tabeta to omou.</i>	- -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ -	- √	√ √	4/7

mitai <i>yameru/yameta</i> <i>mitai</i>	√ √	√ √	- -	√ √	- -	- -	√ √	4/7
koto ga aru <i>suru/sita koto</i> <i>ga aru</i>	- √	√ √	√ √	- √	- √	√ √	√ √	4/7
soo da (hearsay) <i>iku/itta soo da.</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ √	√ -	Adj √	√ √	4/7
yoo da <i>iku/itta yoo da.</i>	- -	√ -	√ √	√ √	- -	√ √	√ √	4/7
no de <i>iku/itta no de</i>	√ √	√ √	- √	√ √	√ √	- √	- √	3/7
mono da <i>suru/sita mono</i> <i>da</i>	- -	√ √	√ √	- -	- -	- -	√ √	3/7
desyoo <i>iku/itta desyoo.</i>	√ -	√ -	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ -	√ √	3/7
tumori <i>iu/itta tumori</i>	√ -	√ √	√ √	√ -	√ -	√ -	√ -	2/7
dake <i>miru dake/</i> <i>mita dake.</i>	- -	√ √	√ √	- -	- -	- -	- √	2/7
hoo ga <i>iku/itta hoo ga</i>	Adj √	√ √	Adj √	1/7				
wake <i>iu/itta wake</i>	- -	√ -	√ -	- -	√ -	- -	√ √	1/7

Presentation: In this category that displayed the *-ru/-ta* contrasts, there was again a wide variation observed in the presentation of both morphemes. Some of the frequently appearing structures that showed the *-ru* and *-ta* contrasts clearly were nominal modifiers, *toki*, extended predicates (*n da*), *kamosirenai*, *tokoro*. Some of the less frequent ones included *wake*, *tumori*, *dake*.

Explanations: With the exception of JSP and NGY, most other textbooks presented and explained the structures with *-ru/-ta* contrasts, one structure at a time. For example, in GNK, under the section on *toki*, non-past tense is explained first (p. 78) followed by past tense (p. 80). On a related note, NKM presents the resultative interpretation of *-te iru* in chapter 10 (p. 400) while the progressive meaning of *-te iru* is explained in chapter 11 (p. 440). It is suggested that the related structures be presented as pairs, adjacent to one another. When presented together, students are able to readily see the differences in use and interpretation

of the two morphemes (or related structures). Let us look at two examples that illustrate the above point. Examples (24) and (25) are from JSP (Vol III, p. 25).

(24) tegami o kak-**u** tokoro desu.  
letter ACC write-NON PAST location COP  
'I am just **about to write** a letter.'

(25) tegami o kai-**ta** tokoro desu.  
letter ACC write-PAST location COP  
'I **just wrote** a letter.'

When (24) and (25) are paired up and presented together, students get to see clearly what the difference in meaning is due to the switch in the *-ru/-ta* morphemes. Here is another example pair.

(26) manga o yom-**u** koto ga arimasu ka. (habitual)  
comic books ACC read-NON PAST habit NOM have QP  
'Do you **read** comic books?'

(27) manga o yon-**da** koto ga arimasu ka. (past tense)  
comic books ACC read-PAST habit NOM have QP  
'Have you ever **read** comic books?'

As can be seen from the above examples, it is easier to spot the differences in the use of *-ru* and *-ta* if the sentences are presented next to each other. Most textbooks examined in this study do not do that. A testable hypothesis in this direction would be to investigate if explicit exposure to *-ru/-ta* minimal pairs causes an improvement in the performances of students in their choices of the two morphemes. More examples of minimal pairs that require students to choose one morpheme over the other (or one closely related structure over the other) are given in section 4.3.

In summary, based on the analysis in this study it became clear that while textbooks already include the more frequently used tense-aspect expressions in a simple to complex sequence, there were variations observed especially in the areas of definitions used as well as selection of aspectual expressions. It would be useful for teachers to introduce tense and aspect as parent categories accompanied by typical characteristics expected of these categories. As also elaborated in

section 4, it is suggested to introduce the parent categories using both definitions and example sentences. Tense is a universally familiar (generic) term that most students have heard of before coming to Japanese language classes. It would make sense to also introduce the aspectual terminology to show how the two are related yet are different. This is essential especially because some structures can only be explained using aspectual terms, such as the difference between the following pairs of sentences:

- (28) asita      ki-**ta**            hito    ni ageru.  
 tomorrow come-PAST people to give  
 ‘I will give it to the person who **would have come** tomorrow.’ (aspect)
- (29) kinoo      ki-**ta**            hito    ni ageta.  
 yesterday come-PAST people to gave  
 ‘I gave it to the person who **came** yesterday.’ (tense)

Additionally, when presenting structures that allow *-ru/-ta* contrasts, it is suggested that they be presented as minimal pairs, next to each other. This kind of presentation allows for clearer recognition of the differences. Since the difficulty level of the aspectual structures varies, teachers can choose to introduce them in small segments depending on the level of the class. Even if not formally teaching them, making frequent references to higher level structures in terms of sharing of similar characteristics within the parent Tense and Aspect categories, will prepare the students to become more receptive to these concepts at the advanced levels as well.

### 3.5 Examples of activities introduced in the textbooks

In this section, examples of activities and exercises given in the textbooks will be introduced. These examples give an insight into how the current materials test the students’ grasp of tense and aspect concepts after they are introduced in class.

### 3.5.1 GNK

The drills in GNK focus on scaffolding practice, sentence completion and pair work exercises. Some examples are given below.

Drill I: Pictures show what Mary did last week. Tell what she did (p. 88).

メアリーさんは月曜日に図書館で勉強しました。

メアリーさんは水曜日に学校でテニスをしました。

Drill II: Based on the pictures, answer the following questions (p. 89).

メアリーさんは月曜日に何をしましたか。

Drill III: Pair Work: Ask what your partner did on Monday, Tuesday, etc.

Drill IV: Connect the sentences using ~とき (p. 89).

友達に来る/ 町を案内する → 友達 came とき、町を案内する。

Drill V: Pair Work: Ask each other.

どんなとき薬を飲みますか。

どんなときうれしくなりますか。

### 3.5.2 JSP

The exercises in JSP are application-driven and context-based type.

Exercise 1: Using pictures that represent various sports, ask and answer about students' general participation, and specific participation yesterday, today and tomorrow (p. 37).

Exercise 2: You are holding a new dictionary. Tell a colleague that you bought it yesterday and that it wasn't very expensive (p. 46).

Exercise 3: A Japanese visitor has been talking to you at length in Japanese far beyond your level of competence. Apologize and tell her you didn't understand (p. 46).

Exercise 4: Your colleagues are discussing Japanese food and you have been asked if you have eaten sushi. Tell them you ate it yesterday (p. 47).

### 3.5.3 NGY

NGY focuses on scaffolding exercises with conjugation practice at the sentence level.

Drill I. Change the following into perfective sentences (p. 8).

アリスさんが食堂へ行きます。 → アリスさんが食堂へ行きました。

Drill II. Change the following into imperfective sentences (p. 10).

アリスさんは日本語を読みませんでした。 → アリスさんは日本語を読みません。

Drill III. Change the following using あした or きのう (p. 10).

アリスさんはサラダを食べる (明日) → アリスさんは明日サラダを食べる。

ルインさんは漢字を勉強する (きのう) → ルインさんはきのう漢字を勉強した。

### 3.5.4 NKM

NKM focuses on activities that rely on an information gap. Most of them are pair work based. The following examples are from an annotated instructor's edition of the textbook.

Activity I: Based on a chart that has Mr. Smith's schedule from yesterday, describe each of his activities (p. 114).

スミスさんは七時に起きました。

Activity 2: Answer the questions based on Mr. Smith's chart (p. 115).

スミスさんはきのう宿題をしましたか。

Activity 3: Pair Work. Fill in a table that shows your partner's yesterday's schedule. Ask questions to complete the table (p. 115).

きのう何時に起きましたか。

朝ごはんは食べましたか。

There is a wide variation seen in the kinds of exercises presented in each of the textbooks illustrated above. Some textbooks focus on scaffolding, mechanical drill types of exercises, while others incorporate context-based, interactive pair work exercises. While these kinds of exercises are basic and needed at the beginning stages of introducing time expressions, what seems to be generally missing (with the exception of JSP, Exercise 1) is a follow up with any type of contrastive exercises that present the past and non-past as well as perfective and imperfective in combinations and have the students tease out the differences. As was also mentioned in section 3.4, the nuances inherent in the tense and aspect morphemes will not become evident if they are always presented and tested one structure at a time. Rather, their nuances will be evident if they are presented together, side by side. Some examples of this suggested way of presenting the practice exercises will be given in section 4.3.

In the next section, suggestions regarding how to introduce additional material will be given in the form of examples, working definitions and application exercises related to tense and aspect in Japanese. Teachers can use these samples to create their own supplementary exercises. It is recommended that teachers follow up on the textbook exercises with these supplementary exercises so as to give students an opportunity to get used to the nuances and learn to navigate their way into making correct choices of the tense-aspect morphemes.

#### **4. Suggested supplementary activities**

In this section, examples of practice exercises as well as some basic definitions useful in clarifying the tense-aspect ambiguity in Japanese will be presented. It is suggested that the information be given out in steps as follows.

##### **4.1 Step one**

Before giving the working definitions, it may be beneficial to present examples and have students come up with their own explanations. It may be useful for the teachers to use linguistic terms such as absolute, relative, progressive, completion

to explain the working of *-ru* and *-ta* in the examples. They may refer to the explanations given in section 4.2. Depending on the level of the students, these characteristics can be introduced in small segments.

Table 6: Tense examples

Example Sentence	Interpretation	Tense	Tense Marker
1. taroo wa mainiti gakkoo e ik- <b>u</b> .	Taro goes to school every day.	Absolute	-u
2. taroo wa kinoo gakkoo e it- <b>ta</b> .	Taro went to school yesterday.	Absolute	-ta
3. taroo wa asita gakkoo e ik- <b>u</b> .	Taro will go to school tomorrow.	Absolute	-u
4. gakkoo e ik- <b>u</b> mae ni asa gohan o tabe- <b>ta</b> .	I ate breakfast before going to school.	Relative	-u (subordinate); -ta (main)
5. gakkoo e it- <b>ta</b> ato de tomodati ni denwa su- <b>ru</b> .	I will call my friend after I go to school.	Relative	-ta (subordinate); -u (main)

Table 7: Aspect examples

Example Sentence	Interpretation	Aspect	Aspect Marker
1. kinoo kuzi ni gohan o tabe- <b>te ita</b> .	I was eating food at 9 o' clock yesterday.	Progressive	-te ita
2. kinoo kuzi ni taroo ga tui- <b>te ita</b> .	Taro had reached (somewhere) at 9 o' clock yesterday.	Resultative	-te ita
3. ima hon o yon- <b>de iru</b> .	I am reading a book now.	Progressive	-te iru
4. yuki ga tumot- <b>te iru</b> .	The snow has accumulated.	Resultative	-te iru
5. kodomo ga hirugohan o tabe- <b>yoo to site iru</b> .	The child is about to eat lunch.	Commencement	-te iru
6. ima kara dekake- <b>ru tokoro da</b> .	I am about to go out.	Commencement	-ru
7. ame ga huri- <b>hazimeta</b> .	It started raining	Commencement	-ta
8. tabe- <b>owatta</b> .	I finished eating	Completion	-ta
9. kaite- <b>simatta</b> .	I completed writing	Completion	-ta

Table 8: Tense-aspect interaction examples

Question	Response	Interpretation of the Response	Tense/ Aspect Marker
kono okasi tabe- <b>ta</b> ? Did you eat this candy?	un, kinoo tabe- <b>ta</b> . Yes, I ate it yesterday	Past Tense (on a timeline)	-ta
kono okasi tabe- <b>ta</b> ? Did you eat this candy?	un, moo tabe- <b>ta</b> . Yes, I have eaten it already.	Perfective Aspect (completed)	-ta

#### 4.2 Step two

Once the students have seen several examples, simple definitions of tense and aspect can be provided as follows.

Tense: Tense refers to the location of a situation on a timeline in relation to a reference point (usually the time of speech). If the speech time is taken as the reference point, then any event that happened before the speech time takes the past tense, while any event after the speech time will take future tense. This is also called Absolute Tense. Relative Tense (in bi-clausal sentences) occurs when the base reference point of calculating tense is not the speech time but the time of the main clause event. Tense markers in Japanese are denoted by *-ta* and *-ru*.

Aspect: Aspect, unlike tense, does not refer to the sequential relation between two points on a timeline. Rather it defines the internal structure of one situation. A situation that has duration (such as ‘eat’) will have a beginning, a progressive continuum, an ending and a resultative continuum. Aspect is used to describe these four internal states of the situation and marks them broadly as finished or unfinished states. Aspect markers in Japanese are denoted by *-ta*, *-ru*, *-te iru*, and *-te ita*.

#### 4.3 Step three

When the students understand these concepts, they should practice a variety of exercises. As they get comfortable with the concepts, they should be able to use the *-ru* and *-ta* morphemes in different situations. As also discussed in section 3.5, the textbook examples were mainly formatted as scaffolding, mechanical drills and pair work types of exercises. In this section, examples of contrastive exercises

that present past and non-past as well as perfective and imperfective in combinations will be presented. These exercises are sequenced from simple (recognition type) to complex (production type and narratives).<sup>(3)</sup> Teachers may choose any type first depending on the level they are teaching.

### A. Multiple choice exercise

This exercise asks students to pick the appropriate choice between the *-ru/-ta* forms given in story-like contexts. The contexts provided could be as short as a sentence as in 1 and 2 or they could be longer as in 3, 4 and 5. These examples are from Iori & Shimizu (2008).

Directions: Choose the appropriate answer from the choices given below. Think about the tense and aspect differences that each choice entails.

1. 彼が来たとき、私は友達に手紙を（書いた・書いていた）。

2. 私は3時間で手紙を（書いた・書いていた）。

3. 店員：いらっしゃいませ。

客：腕時計を見せてほしいんですが。

店員：（ありがとうございます・ありがとうございました）。

腕時計はこちらでございます。どうぞご覧ください。

客：（いろいろ試したあとで）これをください。

店員：（ありがとうございます・ありがとうございました）

<客が品物を受け取って、店を出る>

店員：（ありがとうございます・ありがとうございました）

Or 毎度（ありがとうございます・ありがとうございました）

4. 山田：田中さん、週末にゴルフに行きませんか。

田中：すみません。週末は家族と温泉に行くんですよ。

山田：そうですか。温泉にいらっしゃ（るんですか・ったんです）

か。分かりました。じゃ、ゴルフはまた今度にしましょう。

5. 山田：田中さん、週末にゴルフに行きませんか。  
田中：すみません。この間お話したように週末は家族と温泉に行く  
んですよ。  
山田：そうでした。温泉にいらっしゃ（るんですか・ったんです）  
ね。

### B. Sentence pair exercise

This is an exercise with minimal pairs that require the understanding of tense and aspect structures to successfully tease out the differences. The significant point about this exercise is that closely related structures are presented in pairs, in close proximity to one another for easy recognition.

Directions: Look at the following pairs of sentences and identify the differences. Make sure to keep in mind the tense and aspectual differences between them.

#### 1. Progressive vs. Resultative Aspect

この本は今読んでいる。

この本はもう読んでいる。

#### 2. Imperfective Aspect vs. Past

Q: 日本に行ったことがある？

A1: ううん、まだ行っていない。

A2: うん、去年行った。

#### 3. Relative Tense

日本に行くときかばんを買った。

日本に行ったときかばんを買った。

#### 4. Aspectual Characteristics (about to start, just finished)

ご飯を食べるところだ。

ご飯を食べたところだ。

#### 5. Relative Tense

日本へ行く前に鈴木さんの電話番号を聞いておいた。

日本へ行った後で鈴木さんに連絡した。

6. Past vs. Past Progressive

昨日友達に手紙を書いた。

昨日友達に手紙を書いていた。

**C. Judging the truth exercise**

In this exercise a story is provided, the content of which either matches or does not match with a target sentence given at the end. The students will read the story and choose True or False. This kind of exercise relieves the learners of the burden of producing grammatically correct sentences. Rather it checks whether the learner has a comprehension of the target structure. The following exercise checks the use of relative tense in the target sentence.

Directions: After reading the story below, state whether the following sentence in Japanese is True or False. Your judgment should be based on the content of this story only and not on any external facts or common sense.

1. Hanako is a college student and is planning to go to Hawaii with her friends during her summer vacation. The travel agent who was going to get tickets for Hanako and her friends promised to give a group discount. The agent said he would contact Hanako on the following Sunday morning to give more information about the discount. Hanako goes to the church every Sunday morning at 10 am. She forgot to tell the agent earlier that she will not be available to take his call between 10 am and noon on Sunday. On Sunday morning she waited until a few minutes before 10 am and decided to leave. She thought that if the agent calls after she leaves, then she can let the answering machine take the message and she could call back later. As she was about to leave her house, the telephone rang and she picked up the receiver. It was the agent. Hanako told him that she was leaving for the church and that she will call him after she returns around noon. She put the receiver down and left in a hurry.

いえで でんわを出るとき電話がありました。

True/False

2. Kimiko works in Kyoto. Her parents live in Osaka. Kimiko's new boyfriend is a manager in the same company where she works. Kimiko decided to introduce her boyfriend to her parents. So they take a train from Kyoto to Osaka. Kimiko's parents were very anxious to meet Kimiko and her boyfriend so they asked her to call them before reaching Osaka station. Her parents lived close to the station and were planning to pick up both of them. When Kimiko and her boyfriend were

about to reach the station that was one station before Osaka, she decided to call her parents but realized that her cell phone had run out of charge. So she waited till they reached the station. Once in Osaka, she quickly called her parents from the public phone.

えきつにつ着いたときりょうしん両親でんわに電話した。

True/False

Another variation to this exercise is for students to be given the target sentence and asked to create a story about it.

#### D. Role play exercise

Role play activity is an effective method of letting students master the material by way of acting out stories and situations. While some textbooks examined in this study introduced interactive pair work exercises, it would be useful if some exercises could involve a longer played out story involving more than two participants. Let us look at the following suggestion.

Theme: Organizing a party (level: beginning/intermediate)

Directions: Using the cues below create a dialog story with your classmates asking and answering questions.

1. You are organizing a semester end party at your house. Among the following things to do, what have you done already? What remains to be done?

(Cues: called friends, bought food and drinks, prepared salad, made name cards; Use もう～である、まだ～ていない)

今日パーティーがあります。してあるものとしていないものを教えてください。

2. From the guest list, check who has arrived and who has not. Use もう～ている、まだ～ていない)

パーティーのゲストリストです。誰がもう来ていますか。誰がまだですか。

3. Welcome the guests and offer them food and drink. (Use～ませんか、～てください).
4. With the guests, initiate small conversations about what you did last week, plans for the winter break, plans for today after the party. (Use～たり～たりする for multiple activities)  
先週末は何をしましたか。  
今度の冬休み何をするつもりですか。  
今日の後何をするつもりですか。 .
5. Do 「かんぱい」 with everyone celebrating the end of a good semester!

In this exercise, 1 and 2 address expressions related to aspect, while 4 and 5 focus on tense related expressions. This exercise shows that it is possible to practice a mix of tense and aspect structures together in one exercise.

### E. Narrative exercise

In written Japanese narratives, the *-ru* and *-ta* forms are often found to alternate in an unpredictable manner. ‘Historical Present’ is often used when the narrator chooses the *-ru* form in the middle of a past narrative to express how s/he is feeling at that moment. In a narrative exercise, students learn about using historical present. This exercise is recommended for advanced level.

Directions: Read the following narrative from Yamada (2004) paying special attention to the form of the underlined predicate. After you have read the narrative, think about the underlined endings as tense and/or aspect forms. Identify the historical present forms as well.

僕の父は戦争に (1) 行っていました。太平洋戦争の真っ最中 (2) です。  
アメリカの B29 という飛行機が毎日のように日本に爆弾を落としに (3) 来

ました。夜もおちおち (4) 寝ていられません。毎晩地下室の中で (5) 寝ました。地下室といっても、自分たちが掘った穴ですから、小さな小さな部屋 (6) です。僕のうちでは、畳を上げて床の下に穴を (7) 掘りました。母と私で掘ったの (8) です。父は戦争に行つて留守なので、家族は僕と母と祖母と妹と弟の5人 (9) です。五人が座つたらそれでいっぱい穴 (10) です。

*Answers: Tense (2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10); Aspect (1, 4, 5-habitual); Historical Present (2, 4, 6, 8, 9, 10)*

## 5. Conclusion

Since tense and aspect are intertwined in Japanese, it is difficult for learners to disambiguate the multiple nuances they may encounter for the verbal morphemes *-ru* and *-ta*. The majority of the currently used Japanese language textbooks undertake the difficult task of introducing tense and aspectual properties using mostly tense related terms. It is suggested in this paper that both tense and aspect be introduced as explicit categories along with simple definitions and salient characteristics of these concepts. By doing so, students will be able to make clear distinctions between ambiguous structures that arise due to the tense-aspect overlap. As a supplement to textbook materials, this paper also offers sample exercises to help students navigate through the multiple nuances in the usage of these morphemes. These suggestions will, hopefully, help fill the gap found in the textbook exercises by necessarily including the discussion and practice of **both** of the important areas of tense and aspect in Japanese.

## Notes

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improved the article. All remaining errors are my own. The research was supported by a Faculty Research and Creative Activity (FRCAC) grant from Middle Tennessee State University, for which I am very thankful.

1. -*Ru* and -*u* are allomorphs and will be used interchangeably throughout this paper.
2. The following abbreviations are used in this paper: ACC=accusative, COP=copula, NOM=nominative, PROG=progressive, RESULT=Resultative, QP=Question Particle, and TOP=topic.
3. As suggested by one of the reviewers, the effectiveness of these exercises to improve students' understanding of tense and aspect needs to be tested. Although the scope of the current study did not include effectiveness testing, however it is the next logical step for future study.

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