

The effect of form-focused instruction on Japanese college students

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There has been a long-standing controversy about whether teaching grammar helps to achieve an important goal of language learning, that is, to become able to use the language communicatively.

RELEVANT STUDIES

Krashen (1976, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1982) claims that explicit grammar instruction does not enhance second language acquisition. Krashen's theories have become popular, and "Krashen-bashing" has also become popular among researchers (McLaughlin, 1987). McLaughlin (1978, 1987) and Gregg (1984) claim that Krashen's support for his hypotheses cannot be empirical evidence. Gregg (1984) and Horner (1987) give their own experience in acquiring some forms of foreign languages through form-focused instruction.

Several studies claim that instruction enhances acquisition. For example, Pica (1983) and Sharwood Smith (1988) claim that form-focused instruction helps learners hypothesize and test how rules work and then it becomes a shorter and more effective way to master the language.

Admitting that adults benefit from form-focused instruction, Ellis (1984, 1998), however, argues that there is still no clear evidence that explicit grammar instruction enhances learners' competence in using the knowledge communicatively.

As reviewed above, the pendulum has kept swinging and the usefulness of grammar instruction continues to be argued even today. How about in actual classroom practice?

Thornbury (1998) argues that grammar-centered instruction has always predominated. Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1997, 1998) also claim that grammar-centered instruction has never been abandoned especially in EFL settings.

In Japan, a method similar to the Grammar-Translation Approach has been long used. Since the high competition to enter prestigious colleges has made English “a means of sorting students rather than a path to communication” (Henrichsen, 1989, p.121), English classes in high schools have started to focus on grammar explanation and translation to meet the students’ need, which is to pass the entrance examination to a college. As a result, many learners in Japan can speak English only very haltingly after years of studying and they are disappointed with this approach, and Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology has recently introduced a new curriculum guideline in attempting to enable students to use English communicatively.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Major language schools put on TV commercials saying English must be learned in the way children learn their first languages, and now it seems that people believe studying grammar is a waste. In other words, there seems to be a negative connotation of form-focused instruction. Actually, beliefs that students would not want to study grammar anymore can be found among college teachers.

Therefore, this paper tries to see (1) if form-focused instruction helps to enable college students to use English communicatively and also see (2) if the students think studying grammar is useless in terms of communication.

METHOD

Subjects

This study was conducted over a semester in a private university in two classes, “Communicative Grammar I” and “Communicative Grammar II.” Twenty-one students (eleven females and ten males; ten sophomores and eleven juniors) from “Communicative Grammar I” and twenty-six students (eighteen females and eight males; twenty juniors and six seniors) from “Communicative Grammar II” were involved in this study. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the subjects.

Table 1
The Number of the Subjects

	<i>Communicative Grammar I</i>		<i>Communicative Grammar II</i>	
	F	M	F	M
Sophomore	5	5	--	--
Junior	6	5	13	7
Senior	--	--	5	1
Total	11	10	18	8

Treatment

The grammar structures selected for these classes are as follows: (1) will, be going to, or present tenses with a future meaning, (2) present perfect, present perfect progressive or simple past tense, (3) modals of probability and possibility, and (4) modals of advice, for Communicative Grammar I; (1) auxiliary verbs in short questions, (2) gerunds and infinitives, (3) relative clauses, (4) subjunctive, and (5) conditionals, for Communicative Grammar II. The following are examples of the structures taught in class:

Communicative Grammar I

- (1) will, be going to or present tenses with a future meaning: She will probably get married. / She's going to get married. / She's getting married. / The wedding starts at 1:00.
- (2) Present perfect, present perfect progressive or simple past tense: I have read the book three times. / I have been reading the book for three hours. / I read the book last year.
- (3) Modals of probability and possibility: He may be busy. / He might be busy. / He could be busy. / He must be busy.
- (4) Modals of advice: You should study. / You ought to study. / You had better study.

Communicative Grammar II

- (1) Auxiliary verbs in short questions: Did you? / Aren't they?
- (2) Gerunds and infinitives: I enjoy meeting people. / I want to meet people.
- (3) Relative clauses: I saw the man that helped the girl. / Mr. Smith, who is my English

teacher, lives here. / Dan enjoyed Japanese food, which surprised me.

(4) Subjunctive: I recommended that he see the movie.

(5) Conditionals: If I have time, I'll clean my room. / If I had time, I would clean my room. / If I had had time, I would have cleaned my room.

Each lesson involved combinations of explicit grammar explanation, controlled practice, less-controlled practice and communicative practice. No translation exercises were included.

Instruments

A pretest was administered on the first day of class and a posttest, which was exactly the same as the pretest, was administered on the last day of class. The subjects had not been informed about the tests beforehand. The tests consisted of ten sentences to translate from Japanese into English. When the tests were administered, a more detailed situation was given orally for each sentence, and the students wrote an English sentence at once before moving onto the next sentence together. This was done to make this translation test as communicative as possible. Without being given much time to think about grammar per se but given a specific situation, the students had to think quickly how they would express the given sentences in English in such situations, focusing on meaning rather than form.

Real communicative tasks, such as an interview or a role play, would have been more suitable to test the subjects' communicative competence, but they had to be given up because of time constraints.

A questionnaire was also given with the posttest to find out what the students thought of studying grammar. The questions asked in the questionnaire were as follows: (1) Why did you take this class? (2) What did you think of this class? (e.g., What was most useful? Has your English or your attitude toward English changed?)

Evaluation and analysis of data

The tests were evaluated on the forms that were taught in class. Vocabulary mistakes and other grammar mistakes were ignored. One point was given if the target form was used correctly.

After the evaluation, gain scores (posttest – pretest) were calculated and T-test was run to see if there was any positive effect of form-focused instruction on the subjects' competence in using the structures they learned correctly.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tests

Table 2 shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the pre- and posttests and the gain scores. Ttests indicate that the gain scores in both classes are statistically significant. In other words, the effect of form-focused instruction on the subjects' learning of grammar structures was significant.

Table 2
Scores on Pre- and Posttests and Gains and t-value

	Pretest		Posttest		Gain		t-value
	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.	Mean	Std.Dev.	
Class I (n=21)	3.38	1.50	8.05	1.56	4.67	1.85	11.550*
Class II (n=26)	3.77	1.31	7.69	1.49	3.92	2.10	12.133*

*p<0.001

Total possible score is 10.

Although these results show that form-focused instruction makes a significant difference, there is a problem "from a researcher's point of view because it is difficult to determine which specific option is responsible for any learning that takes place" (Ellis, 1998, p.43): explicit grammar explanation, controlled practice, less-controlled practice, or communicative practice. Also some may claim that the tests used in this study cannot test the subjects' communicative competence accurately, since they consist of translation tasks, which are not necessarily communicative.

Questionnaire

Thirty-five subjects out of forty-seven had positive reasons for taking the grammar-centered classes in college: they did not like or understand grammar in high school and felt they needed to study again, they wanted to remember or review the grammar they learned in high school, and they wanted to become able to use grammar correctly. The others wrote that s/he was just curious about the class, there were no other classes to take, and his/her friends asked him/her to take the class with them.

After studying grammar for a semester, all subjects gave positive feedback: they understood what they had not before, they learned many new things such as usage differences, and they became able to use the structures taught in class when they

spoke or wrote English. It should also be noted that many subjects mentioned that they realized grammar was very important for communication. After the posttest, they were excited to find out that they were able to write the sentences smoothly and correctly, which they could not on the pretest.

No negative connotation of studying grammar was seen among the subjects. They rather felt that studying grammar was important for better communication and that they needed to study grammar in college also, since grammar instruction in high school was not enough for them to understand and become able to use the structures correctly. In the year before this study was conducted, more than sixty students enrolled in one class and there were also several students who asked if they could audit the class. They said that they did not need credits but wanted to study grammar. The class became one of the most popular classes.

College teachers do not need to be afraid to give grammar lessons. Students do not think studying grammar is useless. It does not mean, however, they enjoy "traditional" grammar lessons, that is, grammar explanation and mechanical exercises only. They most enjoy oral practice especially in pairs. They enjoy communicating with each other using the structure they have just learned.

CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to determine whether form-focused instruction helps college students improve their communicative competence, and whether college students think learning grammar is a waste. Before and after a semester-long instruction, a pretest and a posttest were administered. The tests consisted of ten sentences to translate from Japanese into English, with more detailed situations given orally for each sentence in order to have the subjects focus on meaning rather than form. A questionnaire was also given with the posttest to see how the subjects felt about studying grammar.

The results of this study showed that form-focused instruction had a significant effect on the improvement of college students' communicative competence, and they felt studying grammar was not a waste but necessary for better communication.

However, there were some problems in this study. First, the grammar classes that subjects attended consisted of four parts, that is, explicit grammar explanation, controlled practice, less-controlled practice, and communicative practice. It was impossible to determine which part was responsible for the results. If communicative practice is the one that is responsible for the results, it could mean that explicit

grammar instruction itself is useless. Second, the tests used in this study were not communicative enough. Real communicative tasks, such as an interview or a role-play, which were not given in this study because of time constraints, should have been used to test the subjects' communicative competence more accurately. Future research must be conducted with the improvements over these weaknesses of this study. Then, the long-standing controversy about whether form-focused instruction improves learners' communicative competence can be better answered, and both researchers and teachers can benefit from it.

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APPENDIX

Test for Communicative Grammar I

(Sample answers)

- 1 「今からデパートに行ってくる」と言う友人に対して「何を買うの？」
(What are you going to buy? / What are you buying?)
- 2 「今度いつ遊べる？」と聞かれて「電話するよ。」
(I'll call you.)
- 3 「次の映画は7時に始まる。」
(The next movie starts at seven.)
- 4 空の雲を見て「今晚は雨が降るだろう。」
(It's going to rain tonight.)
- 5 「2年前にニューヨークに行ったことがある。」
(I went to New York two years ago.)
- 6 「先月から中国語を勉強しています。」
(I have studied / have been studying Chinese since last month.)
- 7 パーティに誰が来るかと聞かれて「ジムが来るかも。」
(Jim may / might come.)

- 8 「先生は？」と聞かれて「もう帰ったに違いない。」
(*S/He must have gone home.*)
- 9 疲れた顔をした友人に「今晚は早く寝た方がいいよ。」
(*You should go to bed early tonight.*)
- 10 単位が危ない学生に(先生の立場から)「必死で勉強した方がいいよ。」
(*You had better study hard.*)

Test for Communicative Grammar II

(Sample answers)

- 1 “I don't like coffee.”と言われて「え、そうなんですか？」
(*Don't you?*)
- 2 “Is it going to rain tomorrow?”と聞かれて「降ってほしくないなあ。」
(*I hope not.*)
- 3 「英語を話すのは難しい。」
(*It's difficult to speak English. / Speaking English is difficult.*)
- 4 「宿題をするのを忘れた！」
(*I forgot to do my homework!*)
- 5 「先生がその本を読むように薦めてくれたんだ。」
(*The teacher recommended that I read the book.*)
- 6 「会議はどうだった？」と聞かれて「店をもっと多くオープンするように提案したよ。」
(*I suggested that they open more stores.*)
- 7 「明日ひまだったら電話するね。」
(*I'll call you if I'm free tomorrow.*)
- 8 「昨日うちに来てたら一緒にビデオ見れたのに。」
(*We could have watched the video together if you had come to my house yesterday.*)
- 9 「昨日見た映画は面白くなかった。」
(*The movie (that/which) I saw yesterday was not interesting.*)
- 10 「あそこに立っている人が私の先生。」
(*The person who is standing over there is my teacher.*)