Do Types of Output Activities Influence Learners' Acquisition of Accurate Grammatical Forms?

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Introduction

With the introduction of the new Course of Study prescribed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science and Technology in 1999 and 2000, English education at the secondary school level is emphasizing the development of students' communicative abilities. To varying degrees, elements of communicative teaching practices (Nunan, 1991) have been incorporated into the conventional methodology which focuses on teaching of grammar and reading at secondary schools. As a result of this change, the explicit teaching of grammar has been pushed to the periphery of the curriculum at the lower secondary school level (Yamada, 2003). This pattern can also be seen in upper secondary schools, where the explicit teaching of grammar has declined, partly to accommodate students' increasing desire to communicate in English (Sakamoto, Shimizu & Kobayashi, 2002). The limited focus on the teaching of grammar seems to have accelerated students' declining levels of grammatical proficiency. However, this may also be due to the decrease in the number of class hours resulting from

the newly introduced five-day week system starting in 1997 (Onoda, 1998).

This situation poses serious concern to teachers at the university level. Similar to the high school curriculum the traditional university English curriculum was revised to be more communicative, yet at the same time, university teachers are required to deal with a decline of grammatical competence among students, as indicated by student TOEIC scores (Onoda, 2001).

English education in Japan seems to necessitate the explicit teaching of grammar in a communicative curriculum at the university level in order to help students improve their grammatical accuracy. This is one of the main concerns among SLA researchers, namely, the acquisition of ill-formed grammatical forms by learners (Brown, 2002).

There are several approaches available to improve the situation, one of which is form-focused instruction. Focus on form aims to integrate attention to form and meaning as learners engage in meaning-oriented activities (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991). Form-focused instruction within a communicative context "contributes to higher levels of linguistic knowledge and performance" (Lightbown & Spada, 1990, p.125). The findings of the study suggest that accuracy, fluency, and overall communicative skills are probably "best developed through instruction which is primarily meaning-based but in which guidance is provided through timely form-focused activities and correction in context" (Lightbown & Spada, 1990).

Another approach to improve learners' grammatical accuracy is known as pushed output, which forces them to notice the forms with which messages are conveyed (Swain, 1985). By engaging in production, students can improve their grammatical accuracy because output leads learners to pay attention to forms and to test hypotheses that they have formed in their interlanguage.

The present study investigates the types of output tasks that most effectively help students improve their grammatical accuracy after explicitly

teaching grammar.

Theoretical background and previous research

Ways to improve learners' grammatical accuracy is one of the major concerns in SLA literature (Brown, 2002). Although studies validating communicative language teaching (CLT) suggest that grammar can be implicitly learned in the interaction (Nunan, 1989), CLT has recently incorporated the explicit teaching of grammar if considered necessary (Nunan, 1991). However, grammatical accuracy is usually thought to be only a by-product of the CLT method rather than a major concern (Ellis, 1994).

Based on an analysis of research studies on grammar teaching, Norris and Ortega (2000) criticized the effectiveness of the implicit grammar teaching in CLT. Despite the limitations of their study, they concluded that "on average, instruction that incorporates explicit (including deductive and inductive) techniques leads to more substantial effects than implicit instruction (p.125)." According to Norris and Ortega, the explicit "focus on form" was the most effective approach (p.128). Here, explicit instruction refers to the treatment whose main element was deduction (explicit rule presentation) or explicit induction (instructions to orient learner attention to forms or induce metalinguistic hypotheses) (p.135). On the other hand, implicit instruction is defined as the treatment where no explicit rule statement took place in the treatment; no instructions to attend to particular forms or to formulate metalinguistic hypotheses were given to learners.

Explicit grammar teaching relates to the importance of the input of grammatical rules and specific forms. In general, nobody denies the vital role this input plays in language acquisition. This is clearly illustrated in a "computational model " of language acquisition (Takashima, 2001) that explains the process of input leading to output, thus facilitating language acquisition. In

this model, learners have to "notice" specific words and grammar rules in order for them to learn language from the input. Only input that has been noticed will be incorporated into short-term memory and become intake, which finally leads to output. Therefore, it is important to provide with learners input that enables them to implement noticing (Swain, 1995; Schmidt, 1990). This claim necessitates form-focused tasks, such as consciousness raising, input enhancement, explicit grammar explanation, and "input processing" (van Patten & Sanz, 1995, p.11). The importance of focus on form has been advocated by many researchers when implementing form-focused communicative tasks (Doughty & Williams, 1998).

On the other hand, it is also claimed that output is essential in language acquisition. Learners test their formulated hypotheses about interlanguage when they use language, thereby enabling them to restructure their interlanguage, which promotes "noticing" (McLaughlin, 1990; Swain, 1995). This emphasizes the importance of interaction and output, in other words, form-focused communicative activities in the classroom. More importantly, "production forces the learner to pay attention to the forms with which intended messages are expressed"(Swain, 1985, p.45) because of the three functions that output entails: 1. the noticing/triggering function; 2. the hypothesis testing function; and 3. the metalinguistic function (consciousness-raising). However, there is some controversy over the necessity of pushed output in language acquisition (Ellis, 1994). Some researchers say that pushed output may facilitate acquisition but "it is not necessary" (Long, 1996, p. 35).

Therefore, it may be necessary to give corrective feedback to learners' speech production in order to make this more fluent and accurate. Takashima and Ellis's experiment (1999) validated such an approach and indicated that output enhancement by utilizing clarification requests to learners' speech helps them improve fluency and accuracy in speech. Fotos's study (1993) with

Japanese university students also investigated form-focused instruction. An experimental group who were given communicative tasks that made students conscious of grammar rules showed remarkably higher accuracy in grammar than those who were not. Studies conducted by other researchers offer additional support that indicates the beneficial effects of form-focused instruction in a communicative context.

Regarding grammar learning, comprehension tasks have recently been brought into sharp focus. Proponents claim that allowing learners to engage in comprehension practice activities may be more advantageous over explicit grammar rule instruction and production exercises in terms of helping them accurately produce forms (van Patten & Cadierno, 1993; Doughty, 1991). Van Patten and his colleague (van Patten & Sanz, 1995) compared "processing instruction", (involving learners in comprehension-based practice) after giving explicit explanation about the target grammatical item, with getting learners involved in production activity after giving explicit explanation about the target grammatical item. The results show that learners who had been involved in the comprehension-based "processing instruction" performed better on the comprehension and production tasks than those learners in the production group. According to Lee and van Patten (1995), output practice may help improve fluency and accuracy of target grammatical items that have already been acquired. However, they argue that if learners are not ready for the acquisition, in other words, they do not comprehend the meaning and form connection of the target forms, output activities will not be successful. It does not make much difference whether a teacher provides communicative tasks or mechanical drills (Brown, 2002). While this argument sounds convincing, types of output activities do affect students' accuracy of the target forms. In fact, Brown's study conducted with English learners of Japanese showed that "the group involved in mechanical output activities after the explicit explanation was significantly better than"(p.82) the group that received explicit explanation

only. Even though the improvement was only in the immediate performance, the communicative output group did not show any improvement despite van Patten's claims. Much seems to depend on the type of activity used, and this is a basis for the present study.

Purpose and research question

Research question

The present study investigates whether types of output activities immediately after explicit instruction of the target form produce any difference in learners' performance. The two types of output activities are considered in this experiment: 1. a form-focused task (a controlled communicative output task), and 2. a meaning-focused task (a comprehension-based output task).

Hypothesis

When output activities are given immediately after explicit explanation, the type of output tasks (communicative v.s. comprehension) does not affect learners' abilities to recognize correct forms and grammatical knowledge.

Method

Participants:

The participants were 60 sophomores, juniors and seniors (19 years old) who agreed to participate in the present study at a university in Chiba Prefecture. All the students are English majors who are proficient in English, as indicated by their TOEIC scores (Mean=630.5, SD=13.2) and who are highly motivated to study English. 52 of them were female students and 8 were male students. In addition, 26 of the students were sophomores in the researcher's Media English course and 34 were juniors and seniors in the researcher's English

Teacher Training Course. The 60 students were randomly divided into two groups.

Procedure:

This experiment was conducted on May 9th, 2003. An in-house test with fairly high validity (0.87) and high reliability (0.88) is given to university students in March every year at the discretion of the university administration. The most recent grammar section scores were obtained from each participant at the beginning of this study. Subsequently, students were randomly divided into two groups of 30, the experimental group and the control group. The target structure was the use of prepositions.

On Day 1 (Test time 1), a pre-test (a recognition test) was given to the two groups. The grammar section of the previous year's in-house test was utilized as a pre-test because of its high validity and reliability. There were three forms (Form A, B, and C) of the recognition test, each of which had 20 items.

On Day 2 (Test time 2), explicit explanation about the target grammatical item (prepositions) was given to both groups in their native language, Japanese. Following that, the same reading passage describing an accident was given to both groups. The passage included a variety of prepositions. Students in each group circled whatever they thought was important for the activities that followed (such as prepositions) while reading the same passage. The teacher answered questions from students. Subsequently, the experimental group worked on an activity to reproduce the story, whereas the control group worked on a comprehension-based task in which students were told to match the sentence including prepositions with appropriate descriptive pictures.

On Day 3 (Test time 3), students in both groups read a passage describing a tour to a foreign country. While reading, students in both groups again circled whatever they thought was important for the activities. The teacher answered questions from students. After the activities, similar to Day 2, the

experimental group worked on an activity to reproduce the story, whereas the control group worked on a comprehension-based task. On completing the output activity, the same recognition test was given to students. However, this time each student took a different form of the test to cancel any practice effects.

On Day 4 (Test time 4), two weeks later than Day 3, a recognition test was given to students to investigate the delayed effects of the two different treatments. Again, each student took a different form of the test from the previous administrations. Thus, three forms of the recognition test were used.

In this time-series design, the dependent variable is recognition test scores, and independent variables are groups (experimental and control groups) and test times (test time 1 to test time 3). Form types (A, B, and C) can be a third independent variable but if used for counterbalancing, it is not necessary to take this into consideration. Based on the previous administrations of Form A, B, and C, it had already been determined that there were no statistically significant differences were among the three types of tests.

Results

Based on the grammar section scores (maximum 20 points) of the most recent version of the in-house test that students already had taken before the study, no statistically significant differences were found between the two groups ($p = 0.28 > 0.05$). Therefore, it was decided that the two groups were equal in terms of grammatical knowledge and also that a covariate would not be employed.

The results of the two groups indicate that there was no significant difference among the test forms (for the control group: $p = 0.31 > 0.05$, and for the experimental group, $p = 0.35 > 0.05$). This enabled the researcher to compare the two groups by combining the three forms to form a complete test. In

addition, the pre-test results show that there was no significant difference between the two groups ($p = 0.45 > 0.05$).

Since the same students took the test three times, matched t-tests were performed. The means and standard deviation for the pretest, posttest, and follow-up test scores are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Three Tests

	Pretest		Posttest		Follow-up test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Control	14.63	2.28	14.40	2.22	14.77	2.25
Experimental	14.60	2.40	16.10	2.35	16.43	2.72

The matched t-test results indicate that there was a significant difference between the control and experimental groups in the posttest($p = 0.016 < 0.05$) and follow-up test ($p = 0.010 < 0.05$).

Conclusion

This experiment showed that contrary to van Patten's claim, a group of students when engaged in a communicative output task performed better both on the posttest and follow-up test than those engaged in a comprehension-based output task. However, the effects of output activities have not been fully validated because of the limitation of this study. This was a pilot study and the selection of all the participants was not random in the true sense of the word since those students who wanted to participate attended. In addition, the sample size in each group (30 students) and the number of items in each recognition test (20 questions) were not large enough. Furthermore, the test was a multiple-choice recognition test and would not have fully reflected students' active control of grammar. It is suggested that

in future research description tests be incorporated into the study in addition to recognition tests, so that the students' productive skills of target grammatical items can be examined.

However, it was encouraging that communicative output tasks were found to be more effective than comprehension-based tasks. If van Patten's theory of "Input processing" is accepted, students had already mastered the use of prepositions, and therefore comprehension-based tasks were not that effective.

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Appendix:

Sample of the Recognition Test:

1. I saw something (between/among) the wheels of the car.
2. There's a restaurant (opposite/in front of) my house.
3. I woke up several times (for/during) the night.
4. Can I stay (by/until) the weekend?
5. I've spent the day (at/in) York.

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