Effects of Self-Involvement in Form-Focused Instruction in English:

An Experimental Study on Some Grammatical Items with Japanese Technical High School Students

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The goal for conducting this study was to compare the effects of form-focused instruction (FFI) through the use of various activities. Using an experimental group and a control group, this study examined the results of activities with different degrees of student self-involvement by comparing the results of Pretest, Posttest 1, Posttest 2 and their writings. The results of the tests were analyzed by analysis of variance (ANOVA) and a chi-square test. The participants were engaged in writing their internship experiences in English with the use of the grammar points they were taught. They then gave oral demonstrations of their writings. The results of this study were intended to be used for the improvement of English instruction.

In order to measure the necessity of student-involvement, 2 hypotheses were formulated: (1) An increase in student self-involvement in self-expression activities will be more effective for the students to learn grammar targets; (2) an increase in student self-involvement in self-expression activities will be more effective for the students to retain grammar targets.

The participants were comprised of 82 Japanese second-year students from 2 classes of a technical high school: Electrics class and Electronics class. The former served as the experimental group while the latter served as the control group.

For the activities of this study, 3 targets of grammar were selected: conjunctions, participial adjectives, subject + verb + to infinitives. To examine the results of different degrees of student self-involvement, the writing activities the participants engaged themselves in were considered in the light of the 4 points Tanaka and Tanaka (2003) suggested: situational involvement, concreteness, relevance to the students, and open-endedness of the activities.

The experimental group and the control group received the same instruction of the target grammar rules. They were then engaged in self-expression activities with different levels of self-involvement in their writings and their demonstration. In writing, both groups shared the same degrees of situational involvement and relevance while they employed differing degrees of concreteness and open-endedness. The experimental group students wrote individually, made a dialogue in pairs, and then demonstrated it. The control group composed a dialogue in pairs referring to a model dialogue, and then demonstrated it. The control group’s procedures were the same as what their regular routines consisted of.

The analyses of the results were conducted using several methods. First, the use of ANOVA explored the results of Pretest, Posttest 1 and Posttest 2 to measure whether there were any significant changes between the 2 groups during the 3 phases of test. For further investigation, a chi-square test was done item by item in each target, and an error analysis was implemented to reveal some characteristics of the students’ grammatical mistakes in the
We discussed the results of each target grammar point respectively. The results of the analysis of conjunction showed a main effect that indicated that Posttest 1 was significantly lower than Pretest. This was believed to have been due to the different degrees of difficulty among these tests. It was not possible enough to support either Hypothesis 1 or 2 on the use of conjunctions. Meanwhile, the frequency of each conjunction used in the participants' writings was higher in the experimental group than the control group. This suggested that different self-expression activities could encourage their self-involvement.

In the case of participial adjectives of motive verbs, while Hypothesis 2 was only partially supported, Hypothesis 1 was fully supported. The experimental group's average of Posttest 1 significantly exceeded that of Pretest, although the average of Posttest 2 dropped down to nearly the same level as Pretest with a statistically significant difference. Regarding this point, there emerged 2 features from the relationship between explicit instruction and the following activities. First, the average of each test showed a similar change between the experimental and the control groups. The scores of both groups rose at Posttest 1 and fell at Posttest 2. Considering a number of studies (reviewed by Muranoi, 2000; Spada, 1997; Tode, 2007; L. White, 1991), FFI was effective in promoting language learning, but the benefits of explicit FFI were short-lived. Second, considering the higher score of the experimental group than that of the control group at Posttest 1, the activities the former group engaged in seemed more effective than those of the latter group.

The results from a chi-square test, which was conducted on the change of the students' answering patterns from Pretest to Posttest 1, showed a significant difference in the students' understanding of the use of past participles. The experimental group was better at the questions about past participles. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was supported by the results of participial adjectives. This corresponded to the result of the error analysis of the answering patterns of the students. The experimental group was able to learn the grammar points meaningfully. Brown (2007) refers to this kind of meaningful learning as generalization. The frequency of use of the grammatical points was higher in the experimental group than the control group. The control group was not involved in a situation of serious communication breakdown, which Lightbown and Spada (2006) proposed to be essential, because of the help of the model dialogue.

The results of SVO + to infinitive questions indicated that both Posttest 1 and Posttest 2 significantly exceeded Pretest. There was no significant difference between the 2 posttests. Hence, it was not sufficient to support either Hypothesis 1 or 2 on this grammatical point. The variation of the participants' wrong answers in the test revealed that they seemed to confuse SVO + to infinitives and direct speech. The experimental group's higher frequency of their use was not reflected in the scores of Posttest 1.

In conclusion, the activities which had the higher degrees of concreteness and open-endedness improved the students' self-involvement because the experimental group tried to focus on both form and meaning more than the control group. As for the retention of the target grammar points, the students in both groups showed no significant difference between the Pretest and Posttest 2. As N. C. Ellis (2002a, 2002b) and Tode (2007) proposed, continuous and repeated exposure seems to be essential for the retention of grammar rules. This may only exist through self-expression activities.

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