

Japanese Teacher and Student Perceptions Concerning the Role of Grammar Instruction and Corrective Feedback

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英語学習に関する教員と学生の意識調査

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Abstract

This paper explores the perceptions of English teachers at university and students studying English in Japan regarding the role of explicit grammar study and corrective feedback. In order to find out whether the perceptions are different among teachers and students, and whether the perceptions are different among students at different grade levels in Japan, a questionnaire was administered to 355 high school students and 290 university students from different institutions. 52 in-service university English teachers also took part in the survey.

Introduction

Over the centuries, second language educators have swung between favoring teaching approaches which focus on having students analyze language in order to learn it and those which encourage students' using language in order to acquire it. Recently in Japan, the popularity of more communicative approaches which emphasize language use has risen. It used to be said that if students learned the form, communication would somehow take care of itself. Now it is believed that if students somehow learn to communicate, mastery of the forms will take care of itself. However, as Eskey (1983) suggests, mastery of the forms doesn't take care of itself, at least not for many learners and not in the most effective way. Indeed, researcher Pienemann (1984) concludes that giving up the instruction of syntax (grammar) can lead to fossilization.

A number of studies have examined whether corrective feedback in a communicative or task-based language classroom is effective (e.g., Doughty & Varela, 1998; Long, Inagaki & Ortega, 1998; White, 1991). There seems to be a general agreement that grammar instruction is effective, at least in the short term (e.g., Ellis, 2002; Lightbown, 1998). However, Krashen (1992) still insists

that the effect of grammar instruction is “peripheral and fragile”. It is still not clear whether or not corrective feedback can bring about practical changes in learners in the long run.

In the purpose of this study, however, it was not my intention to weigh in either for or against the need for a focus on form(s) in classroom language learning. Rather, its objective is to explore student and teacher perceptions relating to the role they believe explicit grammar instruction and error correction play in learning a new language.

This brief survey attempts to address two questions: 1) Do Japanese in-service teachers at university view grammar instruction and corrective feedback differently from their students? and 2) what are the major similarities or differences in perceptions held by students at different grade level? This essay has three parts. First, I will present a literature review of :1) The different views concerning the value of grammar instruction and / or error correction, 2) The teachers’ and the students’ belief about Language learning, 3) The teachers’ and the students’ perceptions about grammar instruction and / or error collection. In the second part, I will discuss research methodology. Lastly, I will draw results and findings and express implications for English instruction.

1. Literature Review

Different views concerning the value of grammar instruction and /or correction

Classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that grammar instruction and / or corrective feedback can be helpful in enhancing and accelerating adults or adolescents foreign language learning (Doughty& Williams, 1998; Lightbown, 1998; Long & Robinson, 1998; Lyster, Lightbown & Spada, 1999; Narris & Ortega, 2000; Lyster, 2001). Moreover, Lightbown and Spada (1994) investigated the effects of grammar instruction and corrective feedback on the development of specific linguistic structure in the English of francophone students attending intensive English as a Second Language (ESL) programs for five months in grade 5 and 6 (aged 10-12). This program focused on communicative interaction and varied comprehensive input rather than grammar instruction. As a result, students develop listening comprehension, fluency, and communicative ability in English, but they still had problems with linguistic accuracy and using complex sentences.

On the other hand, opponents of this approach believe that there are few benefits in the analysis and practice of particular grammar patterns or in providing corrective feedback (Krashen, 1985, 1999; Schwartz, 1993; Truscott, 1999). That is, error correction could inhibit students from freely expressing themselves. Krashen (1982) recommends that teachers concentrate on providing lots of comprehensive input so that learners can acquire a second language naturally like children acquiring their mother tongue. Schachter(1991) conjectured that the efficacy of grammar instruction and corrective feedback may well depend on aspect of language, learner characteristics (including, for instance, age, aptitude, motivation, and learning style), and instructional context.

Teachers' and Students' belief about Language Learning

Language learners are not always conscious of their individual learning style, but virtually all learners, particularly older learners, have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be conducted. These beliefs are usually based on previous learning experiences and the assumption (right or wrong) that a particular type of instruction is the best way for them to learn. Learner beliefs play an important role in motivation, and selection of learning strategies (Kern, 1995, Mantle-Bromley, 1995, McCarger, 1993). For example, in a survey of international students learning ESL in a highly communicative program at an English speaking university, Carlos Yorio (1986) found high levels of dissatisfaction among the students. The communicative program focused exclusively on meaning and spontaneous communication in group work interaction. However, the majority of students expressed concerns about the absence of attention to grammar instruction, corrective feedback, or teacher-centered instruction. Therefore, several of them even felt that their progress was negatively affected by an instructional approach which was not consistent with their beliefs about the best ways for them to learn.

Teachers' and students' perceptions about grammar instruction and /or error correction

In more recent literature, researchers believe that students consider grammar instruction or error correction as helpful features in the learning of another language (Manley & Calk, 1997; Conard, 1999). Moreover, students favor communicative approach in combination with structural approach involving grammar instruction and corrective feedback (Conard, 1999; Schulz, R., 1996, 2001). Some typical conventional teachers placing emphasis on grammar instruction still teach grammar for grammar's sake. For example, when they teach past tense, they teach regular-ed form with its two pronunciation variants and irregular verbs. Handing out a list of irregular verbs that students must memorize, they make students do pattern practice drills for -ed. In addition, most teachers regard error correction both in writing and speaking as very important. They believe it leads to the improvement of their language skills. From this point of view, there exist discrepancies between teachers' and students' perception about the value of grammar instruction and error correction (Schulz, 1996, 2001).

2. Research Method

Data Collection Instrument

Questionnaires from Schulz's study (2001) with 12 items, in which 5-point scales was represented were used. There was one questionnaire for teachers, the other for students. The questionnaire for students was written in Japanese whereas the teacher version was in English. As for items #8, 10, 11, and 12, teachers were asked to think of themselves as an English learner.

Participants

290 university students, US, and 355 high school students, HS, from different levels cooperated, and 52 in-service university teachers, UT, are participants. Given that many of the teachers responded anonymously and the teacher questionnaire did not ask for gender identification, the exact ratio of male to female respondents is unknown. The large majority of teacher respondents were, however, female. Because many of the responding teachers taught at more than one university, the results were not broken down by university.

Data Collection Procedure

Data from English teachers working in universities was collected in person. Teachers marked their response directly the questionnaire for later tabulation.

Most of the university students' data was collected in my English classes. Some data was collected by asking a student who doesn't belong to my university to gather responses from his university.

High school data was collected by email and online questionnaires and telephone interviews. In addition, my colleagues who also teach at high school helped collect responses.

Data Analysis

The data were simplified by collapsing the 5-point scale used to elicit responses (agree strongly, agree, undecided, disagree slightly, disagree strongly) into a 3-point scale (agree/ strongly, undecided, disagree/ strongly). These are expressed in percentages. Since the focus is limited to the "agree/ strongly agree" responses on the scale, it is certain that not all students elicited large differences in opinion between high school students and university students. Therefore, any discrepancy of 10 % or less perceptions was considered insufficient for pointing meaningful differences between the groups.

Tables 1 through 7 summarize responses (expressed in percentage) for perceptions regarding the role of grammar for both students and teachers of university. They also show the discrepancy rate in the responses. Tables 8 through 12 report student and teacher perceptions regarding corrective feedback.

3. Results and Findings

Differences in Perception between University students and Teachers

Looking at the University Students (US) and University Teachers (UT) comparisons (lines 2 and 3 of Table 1 through 7), we see the striking discrepancies between US and UT in their perceptions regarding the role of grammar. All responses (1through7) showed discrepancies of more than 10%. 54% of the US versus 81% of their teachers agreed that the formal study of grammar is essential to the eventual mastery of English; only 18% of the US versus 50% of their teachers believed that their English improves most quickly if they study and practice English grammar; 77% of the US versus 100 % of their teachers believed that the study of grammar helps

in learning English; 24% of the US versus 58 % of their teachers agreed that they like study of grammar; only 18 % of the US versus 35 % of their teachers thought that there should be more formal study of grammar in their English class; 48% of the US versus 92% of their teachers believe that they usually keep grammar rules in mind when they write in English or read what they have written. These rates indicate that university teachers in Japan have a considerably greater affinity for a focus on forms.

As for question 7: “It is more important to practice English in real-life situations than to study and practice grammatical patterns.”, however, showed a discrepancy in opinion of 29% in an opposite way, which means US have greater faith in the communicative approach in learning English (see Table 7)

The discrepancy rates between US and UT responses for the question dealing with error correction also show disagreements. Two of the five questions (8 and 10) showed the same discrepancy rate of: 16 %. Concerning question 10: “I feel disappointed if a teacher does not correct the written work I hand in.”, 46% of the US marked “Undecided” or “Disagree” in total. On the other hand, UT strongly agreed with this (see Table 10). This suggests that UT have a stronger preference for error correction, which is consistent with their stronger belief in the role of grammar in English learning.

Interestingly, there was little discrepancy in perceptions for the remaining questions. A large majority of both US and UT (80% and 96%, respectively) disagreed with the statement, “Teachers should not correct students when they make errors in class” (see Table 9); and 76% of the US versus 73 % of their teachers, respectively, expressed a preference for having their speaking corrected; 95% of the US versus 96% of their teachers indicated that they expect their teachers to correct errors in writing (see 12).

Table 1
Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Grammar

Q1: The formal study of grammar is essential to eventual the mastery of English			
	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	60%	28%	12%
US	54%	34%	12%
UT	81%	11%	8%

Table2
Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Grammar

Q2: I believe my English improves most quickly if I study and practice English grammar.			
	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	25%	49%	26%
US	18%	48%	34%
UT	50%	31%	19%

Table 3

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Grammar

Q3: The study of grammar helps in learning English.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	74%	21%	5%
US	77%	18%	5%
UT	100%	0%	0%

Table 4

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Grammar

Q4: I like the study of grammar.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	20%	30%	50%
US	24%	25%	51%
UT	58%	31%	11%

Table 5

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Grammar

Q5: There should be more formal study of grammar in my English classes.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	35%	39%	26%
US	18%	49%	33%
UT	35%	46%	19%

Table 6

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Grammar

Q6: I usually keep grammar rules in mind when I write in English or read what I have written.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	41%	34%	25%
US	48%	30%	22%
UT	92%	0%	8%

Table 7

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of grammar

Q7: It is more important to practice English in real-life situations than to study and practice grammatical patterns.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	60%	28%	12%
US	71%	25%	4%
UT	42%	54%	4%

Table 8

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Error Correction

Q8: I dislike it when I am corrected in class.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	21%	20%	59%
US	16%	17%	67%
UT	0%	4%	96%

Table 9

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Error Correction

Q9: Teachers should not correct students when they make errors in class.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	7%	18%	75%
US	4%	16%	80%
UT	4%	31%	65%

Table 10

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Error Correction

Q10: I feel disappointed if a teacher does not correct the written work I hand in.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	65%	15%	20%
US	54%	25%	21%
UT	70%	19%	11%

Table 11

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward the Role of Error Correction

Q11: When I make errors in speaking English, I would like my teacher to correct them.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	69%	18%	13%
US	76%	15%	9%
UT	73%	19%	8%

Table 12

Student / Teacher Attitudes toward Error Correction

Q12: When I make errors in writing English, I would like my teacher to correct them.

	Agree / Strongly Agree	Undecided	Disagree / Strongly Disagree
HS	89%	7%	4%
US	95%	4%	1%
UT	96%	4%	0%

Note. HS=High school Students, US=University Students, UT=University Teachers

Differences in Perceptions between High school and University Students

Looking only at the student comparisons (lines 1 and 2 of Table 1 through 7), we see that only items reported in Tables 5 and 7 among the seven items dealing with the role of grammar in English learning show discrepancies higher than 10 %. The larger discrepancy (17%) was found for question 5 (Table5): “There should be more formal study of grammar in my English course.” While 35% of high school students marked “agree strongly” or “agree” for that item, only 18% of university students did so, which indicates that high school students tend to focus on forms more than university students do.

Question7, “It is more important to practice English in real-life situations (i.e., ask and answer questions, engage in role-plays or other simulations, etc) than to study and practice grammatical patterns.” showed a 11% discrepancy rate between high school and university students. Although the majority in both groups thought that practicing English in real-life situations was more important than the study and practice grammatical patterns, university students would like a more communicative approach.

Interestingly, there was little discrepancy (i.e., 10% or less) in perceptions for the remaining items. A large majority of both high school and university students (74% and 77%, respectively) believed that the study of grammar helps in learning English (see Table 3) and claimed that they keep grammar rules in mind when they write in English or read what they have written (41% and 48%, see Table 6). However, as for question 4: “I like the study of grammar.”, both high school and university students (50% and 51%, see Table 4) marked “disagree strongly” or “disagree” for that item. Another majority (60% and 54%, respectively) agreed that “The formal study of grammar is essential to eventual mastery of English” (see Table 1), with the high school

students favoring grammar by 6%. Also, question 2 (see Table 2): “My English improves most quickly if I study and practice the grammar” indicated that both groups don’t have faith in the benefit of grammar study, with an only 25% and 18% agreement.

Of the five items dealing with attitudes toward error correction (see Table 8 through 12), only question 10: “I feel disappointed if a teacher does not correct the written work I hand in.” showed a 11 % discrepancy rate, which is consistent with high school students’ stronger belief in the role of grammar. No remaining questions showed discrepancies in agreement between high school and university students higher than 9%. Thus, there was no meaningful difference (mentioned in the definition above) between the two groups in their perceptions regarding the desirability of corrective feedback. The strongest student agreement among all questions can be found on Tables 8, 9 and 12. 21% and 16% in both groups indicated a dislike of being corrected in class (see table 8); 75% of high school students versus 80% of university students disagreed with the statement, “Teachers should not correct students when they make errors in class” (see table 9); and 89% versus 95 % of the high school and university students, respectively, expressed a preference for having their written work corrected. (see Table 12). As for question 11 (see Table 11): “When I make errors in speaking English, I would like my teacher to correct them”, higher than 9% discrepancy could not be observed (only 7 % difference), however, university students had a stronger preference for error correction in speaking, which is consistent with their belief in the communicative approach.

3. Conclusion

Generally speaking, the data provide evidence of a positive belief that although half of both students in high school and university don’t like the study of grammar, formal grammar study plays a positive role in English learning. A large majority of students agreed that the study of grammar helps in learning English (question 3). Especially, high school students show a stronger tendency to rely on grammar. About one third of high school students agreed that there should be more formal study of grammar in their English classes. In addition, students, particularly university students, felt that real-life communicative tasks play a very important role as well. Compared to students, teachers were more favorably inclined toward the study of grammar and put less emphasis on communicative tasks.

Questions dealing with error correction (Table 8 through 12), there are not big discrepancies in perception between students and teachers although question 8 and 10 show a discrepancy rate. However, question 10: “I felt disappointed if a teacher does not correct the written work I hand in.” is worth pointing out. Whereas the majority of teachers expressed agreement with this statement, almost half of the students in university (Undecided and Disagree in total) don’t feel that way. This implies that while students would like their teacher to correct errors in writing (question12), they don’t expect their teachers to correct all errors in each student draft. Indeed, in a small, informal follow-up study with 10 students, all students interviewed expressed their sympathy toward their writing teacher who has to conduct a large size of class, which has basically

between 30 to 40 students, and believed that correcting all students' writing is too much burden for a teacher.

4. Implications of the study

Learners have clear preference for how they go about learning language and have strong beliefs and opinions about how their instruction should be delivered. These beliefs are usually based on previous learning experience and the assumption that a particular type of instruction is the best way for them to learn. As many educators and researchers mention, students' progress can be negatively affected by an instructional approach which was not consistent with their belief about the best ways for them to learn. That is, language learning could be hindered if students have specific beliefs regarding the role of the grammar and corrective feedback and if their expectations are not met.

As far as Japanese students including high school students are concerned, a communicative oriented curriculum with grammar instruction elements might be most supported. Although most Japanese students don't like learning grammar in class, they still believe that the study of grammar can help in learning English. This suggests, therefore, that the change of methods for teaching grammar would allow students to gain motivation.

Moreover, since the majority of students and teachers agree with the importance of error correction both in speaking and writing, teachers, then, should work on "when" and "how" to provide appropriate and effective corrective feedbacks.

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