Utilization of a Local Dialect and a Task Activity: Making the Best Use of the Focus on 'Form' and 'Forms' Approaches

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Abstract

The utmost concern of English education in Japan, where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), is in what ways Japanese teachers can get their learners of English to use English communicatively, i.e., correctly as well as appropriately in a required context outside the classroom.

This article proposes using two apparently conflicting approaches in second language acquisition — focus on forms and focus on form — in order to solve a nearly perpetual problem for most Japanese learners of English: the learners' inert, or inactive language use problem. The first takes advantage of using the learners' local Japanese dialect, which happens to have corresponding constructs of the distinction between the English present perfect and past tenses, in explaining grammar rules, i.e., adopting a 'focus on forms' approach in grammar instruction. The other devises a 'task activity,' a staged task, as it were, where the learners are implicitly required to use specified grammar structures at certain instructed stages before completing a given task, i.e., incorporating a 'focus on form' approach.

With a quasi-experimental design, this study reports on the effectiveness of utilizing the local Tosa Dialect in conjunction with task activities (TAs). It is concluded that such simulated activities as task activities, when sandwiched between the explicit but concrete grammar explanations before the activity and the grammatical feedback after it, are a more effective means of enhancing learning and helping the learners to use the grammatical rules more accurately and appropriately in a required context.

0. Introduction

Even back in 1967, Corder, citing a statement by Von Humbolt, says that "we cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will be developed spontaneously in the mind in its own way. " (p. 169)　This remark still holds true in language education now in the 21st century.　It is one of our English teachers' responsibilities to set up an environment in which the English language is learned efficiently and economically.[1]

English education in Japan now strongly requires that learners have the ability to apply the language rules for the purpose of real communication. This is due to the fact that, in 2002, the revised *Course of Study*, which is a guideline for English teachers in Japan, placed the term 'practical' before 'communication ability' to encourage the enhancement of the learners' speaking and listening abilities, though it does not specify what classroom activities make this possible. The teachers are thus entirely responsible for what to do — or what not to do. Thus, both explanations regarding such grammar points as the making of a distinction between the present perfect and the past tense forms and the giving of ample practice in the accurate and appropriate use of one structure over the other are required in order for the learners to compare the two structures cognitively before they can be put into use.

Though more and more emphasis has been placed on using English interactively in the classroom, under the guise of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), simply exposing English to 30 to 40 students by giving them a variety of tasks without much feedback is fruitless and is totally a waste of time and efforts.　Such a use of tasks is simply not directly applicable in the EFL context, as these tasks are for mid- to advanced level learners, not for the beginners whose knowledge of grammar,

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[1] Other responsibilities include being: an interlocutor for interactions in language; a giver of feedback, either positive or negative, whenever the learner is engaged in the language learning.　Further responsibilities include being someone: to orchestrate the learners' scattered pieces of knowledge into order or a system, as it were; to design lessons as a supply of input; to present input; to be a presenter; and, very importantly, to encourage the learners to gain self-confidence. (Takashima, 2006)

vocabulary, and structure is limited.   On the other hand, as DeKeyser (1998: 62) says, "we need to think carefully about what the goal of each teaching / learning activity is: instilling knowledge about rules, turning this knowledge into something qualitatively different through practice, or automatizing such knowledge further in the sense that it can be done ever faster with fewer errors and less mental effort.   Whichever of these three goals for specific learners and specific structures might be at a specific time, mechanical drills seldom have anything to offer. "

Larsen-Freeman (2003), referring to Whitehead (1929), recognizes the 'inert knowledge problem' among second language learners and claims that grammar should not only be taken as solid knowledge, but also as a 'skill,' emphasizing that grammar changes all the time according to context.   She warns language teachers that they have been too much concerned with a form-meaning mapping and have left aside the element of 'use,' which deals with issues concerning the choices that users make when using the forms of language in communication.   She claims that although the learners may understand how a structure is formed and what it means, they synchronously need to know why speakers choose to use one form rather than another when both forms have more or less the same or similar grammatical or lexical meaning. After all, the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use make explicit the need for students to learn to use grammar structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately.

Since Japanese learners can neither enjoy the luxury of getting free input outside the classroom nor get enough interaction or feedback inside the classroom, explicit grammar instruction (= focus on forms) by the teacher, and a trial-and-error type of communicative activity followed by explicit feedback (= focus on form) is in order.   It is exactly this time when the 'use' explanation should be given in association with the form-meaning mapping followed by a communicative activity in which the learners have an opportunity to test their hypotheses about the distinctive uses of some particular structures they have learned; thus, there is a combination of a focus on forms followed by a focus on form approach.

1.   Combination of Focus on Forms and Focus on Form Approaches
It is generally the case that when there are two approaches, both of

which are partially attractive, the eclectic way would be to make the best use of the best in each approach.　Here, these two approaches are called 'focus on forms' and 'focus on form'.　Details aside, the major differences are that in the former, instruction is preemptive and reactive in that some grammatical explanations are given before the communicative practice and error correction is given in response to the predetermined structures, while in the latter, after learners are given a lot of communicative activities based on the learners' needs analysis, instruction or the instructor's intervention (i.e., grammatical explanations) takes place focusing on the learners' performance errors in order to draw learners' attention to linguistic forms as they arise incidentally (Long, 1991).

In the EFL context, in contrast with the ESL (English as a Second Langage) one, outside of the classroom, the learners cannot enjoy the luxury of using English interactively and getting feedback on its use. Therefore, it would be best both to give these learners grammatical explanations to compensate for this lack of exposure which would normally help them deduce grammatical rules from input and to give them opportunities to use these rules in a communicative activity in order to see how well or how much they have learned to use them in a context.

We have all learned our first language as a tool of communication in a broad sense.　In that same sense, we need to learn the second language of English as a more active language.　One way to make this possible is to see grammar instruction from a different angle.　That is, we can utilize a Japanese dialect as one of the more efficient approaches to English grammar explanation.　Quite recently, we found that the Tosa Dialect in Kochi Pref. has constructs corresponding to those in English which distinguish between the present perfect and the past tense forms (Imai, 2003).　Making a distinctive use between the present perfect and the past tense is an exceptionally difficult concept to grasp for non-native speakers whose language does not have the same concept. It is thus quite natural to think of exploiting these similarities between the Tosa Dialect and English, for it seems to be true for the learner that "those elements that are similar to his native language will be simple for him. (Lado: 1957: 2)" Concerning the use of native language, Butzkamm (2003) argues in his article that Hammerly (1991: 151) estimates that the judicious use of the mother tongue in carefully crafted techniques "can be twice as efficient, without any loss in effectiveness, as instruction that ignores the students' native language."

After having had the use of a form explained to them, the learners need to activate their linguistic knowledge. They must be provided with opportunities to practice this use in realistic communicative situations in which they can gain experience in using the language that they themselves want to use. Learners can carry over and retain their linguistic knowledge through a Task Activity (TA), a staged task, as it were, where the learners are implicitly required to use specified grammar structures at certain instructed stages before completing a given task, i.e., incorporating a 'focus on form' approach (for details, see below in Section 5). Implementation of the TA gives learners the opportunity to engage in message-focused interaction in pairs; they need to proceduralize their knowledge.

2. Why the Present Perfect?

The present perfect has been chosen as our target grammar item for two reasons:

(1) The present perfect is reportedly one of the most difficult structures for second / foreign language learners to grasp, as Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) mention that the distinction between the present perfect and the simple past tense is often best sorted out in a discourse.

(2) The Tosa Dialect of Japanese has a corresponding structure, but it has never been tested to see whether the use of the corresponding Japanese concept helps the Japanese students to use the English present perfect distinctively from the simple past tense form better than does the traditional way of teaching the structure.

3. The Present Perfect in Japanese Tosa Dialect

Japanese Tosa Dialect makes the same distinction between the present perfect and the past tenses as does English by attaching "~*chuu*" to a verb as in

> (1) Ame   ga   fu-cchuu.   (= It has rained.)
>   Rain   subject-marker   has fallen

On the other hand, the simple past meaning is expressed through attaching the past (or perfect) marker, "-tta."

(2)	Ame	ga	fu-tta.	(= It rained.)
	Rain	subject-marker	fell	

However, in standard Japanese, Japanese sentence (2) literally has a double meaning, covering both (1) and (2), while in Tosa dialect, people can distinguish (1) and (2) by adding either "-chuu", or "-tta" respectively. Thus, even out of context, to Tosa people, there is only one interpretation of (2), though to most other people, (2) is ambiguous and for other people to comprehend which message the speaker wants to convey, it depends utterly on the context.

Thus, for most people in Tosa district, when "*fu-cchuu*" is used in communication, it is understood that both the speakers and the listeners connect the current situation with one where it rained at a prior point in time. Not only can they see the results of the rain falling, but they also feel some connection of the fallen rain to their current state of mind. However, the sentence with the past marker does not show any connection to some other point in time; it simply reports the event of rain falling in the past.

4. Grammatical Explanations and Tasks

In order to develop their 'practical communication abilities,' learners need to be provided with opportunities for communicative language use. That is, they need to practice English in simulated communicative situations in which they can gain the maximum experience of using the language that they themselves want to use in order to get the teacher's corrective feedback. However, to compensate for the lack of exposure and natural feedback, both of which are available in the ESL context, the EFL Japanese learners need linguistic knowledge (i.e., declarative knowledge), about the L2 that will be automatized (Anderson 1993: 388). There needs to be an effective way to turn their declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge (i.e., the ability to use target features spontaneously in communication). In order to accomplish this transformation, 'tasks' are generally thought of as very effective candidates for eliciting authentic language use from learners in the classroom and thereby fostering their communication abilities. In other words, tasks can serve as triggers for converting declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. Ellis (2003) provides the following characteristics of a task:

(1)　A task involves a primary focus on message conveyance.
(2)　A task involves some kind of gap.
(3)　A task allows the learners to select the linguistic resources they will use.
(4)　A task has a clear outcome other than the display of language.

5.　Characteristics of Task Activities

Tasks are indeed good candidates for turning declarative into procedural knowledge since focus on the approach is possible; in other words, communication is followed by feedback whenever errors occur. However, there is a big gap between 'tasks' and traditional controlled activities where learners are required to use the target structure they have just learned following a set formatted dialogue in a given situation.

Takashima (2000) proposes employing task activities (TAs), in which structure-based tasks are designed to elicit the production of a specific target feature in order to express the intended message according to specific given situations. TAs are designed to induce learners at some point to use one particular structure selected from among other similar structures to best suit the required context, while keeping their primary focus on the message completion of the activity. TAs are characterized by six conditions:

(1)　They should require *completion.*
(2)　They should be *message-focused.*
(3)　They should involve *negotiation of meaning.*
(4)　They should entail *comparison of structures.*
(5)　They should contain an *information gap.*
(6)　They should be *of interest* to the learners.

<div align="right">(Takashima, 2000)</div>

Sugiura and Takashima (2003) reviewed a series of empirical research carried out in junior and senior high schools in Japan, investigating the effects of TAs. They concluded that almost all studies, especially in the written tests, showed the TA group was significantly different from the Control Group, which used a controlled activity.

6. The Study

The TA approach having been determined to be effective in proceduralizing the learners' grammar knowledge, a quasi-experimental test examining the effectiveness of utilizing the Tosa Dialect was conducted in Japanese junior high schools. The subjects for this study were third-year learners (aged fifteen on average) at two public junior high schools. The research design was quasi-experimental in that there were two intact different groups: the grammar explanation group that incorporated the Tosa Dialect (the E-Group: $N = 123$) and the traditional grammar explanation group (the C-Group: $N = 139$). Each particular explanation was followed by our original communicative grammar test called the Use-Oriented Comprehension Test (UOCT); it is 'Use-Oriented' in the sense that the right answer can be chosen by the learners' understanding of the particular use of the word(s) in the particular context. This test was administered to assess the subjects' comprehension of how to use the appropriate structures in context. There were 20 questions, each question having four different grammatical structures as possible answers, and 20 minutes were given to answer them. For instance, in the following test item, the learners were asked to read: 'Takuya (   ) his leg." and were then asked from among four possible choices to choose the best option to suit the context. The learners would have to read and to understand the context in use to answer correctly. In this case, ③, the present perfect form, rather than ②, the past tense form, has to be selected.

(Example)　　　　A: Takuya (   ) his leg.
　　　　　　　　B: I know that.　　He still cannot walk.

　　　　　① breaks　② broke　③ <u>has broken</u>　④ was breaking

The effectiveness of the TA was investigated through listening tests, because both listening tests and TAs require learners to judge and decide quickly which language structure is appropriate. The scores of each test were statistically analyzed. In order to see the statistical differences of the mean scores on the tests, the General Linear Model (GLM) with Repeated Measures, which is equivalent to the two-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), was employed with alpha set at the .05 level. An overall statistical significance was found.

7. Analysis of Written Data

A Tukey test on the present perfect indicated that a difference was seen between the C-Group and the E-Group on the pre-UOCT ($p = .0001$), with the E-Group lagging behind the C-Group. However, the post-UOCT, which was administered immediately after the grammar instruction, showed no significant difference in the scores ($p = .194$). In addition, the follow-up UOCT indicated that no difference was seen between the two groups ($p = .339$).   This means that the two groups were considered to be equivalent in their knowledge and ability on the present perfect in the end.   In other words, the E-Group caught up with the C-Group.

In order to see whether or not there were differences between the mean scores on the present perfect in each test within the groups, Paired Sample T-tests were applied to the data. The results show that, in the C-Group, no significant differences were found on the present perfect among the pre-UOCT, post-UOCT, and follow-up UOCT. On the other hand, in the E-Group, significant improvements were found between the pre-UOCT and the post-UOCT ($p = .0001$), and the pre-UOCT and the follow-up UOCT ($p = .0001$), whereas no significant difference between the post-UOCT and the follow-up UOCT was found ($p = .051$). This indicates that the effect lasted even four weeks after the instruction. The results of the UOCTs reveal that utilization of the Tosa Dialect in the grammar explanation is an effective tool in enhancing learners' comprehension and retention of the present perfect.

8. Analysis of Listening Test

The listening tests were analyzed for the present perfect by the same procedures as were used in the case of the analysis of the UOCTs. Paired Sample T-tests were conducted to make comparisons of the scores on the tests within the groups. The results showed, in both the C-Group and the E-Group, significant differences were found between the listening pre-test and the listening post-test ($p = .0001$).

Listening tests, unlike written tests, require the learners, while listening, to quickly judge and decide on-line which language structure is appropriate for their responses. Such listening tests are similar to TAs in a sense; both listening tests and TAs require learners to judge on the spot which form is appropriate for a certain purpose or in a certain context. Therefore, the findings suggest that implementation of TAs has

a positive effect in comprehending the present perfect on the listening test.

9.　Conclusions

In second / foreign language acquisition, though it is not sufficient, input is a necessary element. Indeed, this study has shown how crucial the form-meaning connections — or mapping — are in order for a particular structure to be appropriately used.   (See VanPatten, 2003)

This study has proposed the utilization of a dialect in grammar instruction in order both to promote enhancing the mapping among the three dimensions, form, meaning and use, and to make language use more meaningful to the learners. It has been further suggested that such an explanation be followed by a TA with feedback to give the learners the opportunity to test their hypotheses about the use component.

There are two key findings among these results that have potentially important pedagogical implications. The first is that it is essential for learners to feel the appropriate use of the English language in a more active and familiar way. In other words, we need to consider the utilization of our mother tongue, especially dialects, as one of the more efficient approaches to English grammar instruction.   And this grammar explanation must also be considered from the viewpoint of communication, i.e., from the 'use' perspective.   Compared with the 'form' or 'meaning' dimensions, the 'use' dimension seems to be complicated for Japanese learners. In order for our learners to deal appropriately with the 'use' dimension, utilizing our Japanese dialects can be applicable.   Doing so with the Tosa Dialect has been shown to have positive effects.

The second finding is that experience in language production, such as in TAs, is effective in promoting the learners' understanding of how the target structures are used. TA-implementation enables learners to identify gaps in their knowledge of the language and to prepare their own knowledge base for reception of the new language. In other words, using language exposes the gap in the learners' knowledge; that is, the learners notice the gap between their current and the target-led knowledge.   It is a more effective way to turn declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. A basic challenge to language teaching is to

provide learners with practice in improvising the expression of their meanings.   TAs would seem to be an important way of helping learners to use English appropriately as well as accurately. (See Takashima 2005 for more details.)

There is also one last suggestion to come out of this study.   As second language teachers, we should not shift from 'focus on forms' to 'focus on form' right away, but rather we should apply each one with care; after all, it is crucial not to throw the baby out with the bath water.   In order to get the best results in the EFL context, we should integrate the two approaches.   For, while it is true that grammar should be explained explicitly, the learners also need to have an opportunity to carry this grammar over or transfer it to their knowledge of their mother tongue and to transform its use in a more communicative way into the new foreign language use.   It is this combination that works best, not the one or the other.

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