

The Effects of Feedback on Errors and Reading Activities on Improving Beginners' Grammatical Knowledge

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Abstract

Controversy over the issue of feedback on errors still exists. Some research suggests that grammar correction in writing is not useful (Semke, 1984; Kepner, 1991; Truscott, 1996) and reading activities are more effective in developing literacy skills (Krashen, 1993; Mason & Krashen, 1997). Some research insists that feedback on errors helps learners improve their grammatical accuracy (Fathman & Whalley, 1990). On the other hand, Krashen (1993) suggests that grammar instruction could be efficient for older students. In this study, learners at a beginning level in English were offered grammar instruction along with feedback on errors in the spring semester, while they were offered reading activities in fall. Explicit grammar instruction and grammar correction as well as extensive reading may be helpful to beginners with limited lexical and grammatical knowledge in the EFL situation.

Introduction

Most Japanese high school graduates have had six years' experience in English education at secondary school. However, most university students have not received enough English grammar instruction there in recent years. When they go to college and university, some students do not reach even the intermediate level of English proficiency. Some of them are placed into the upper-low level or the beginner level. In this study some beginner level freshmen were given grammar instruction based on mainly basic sentence pattern drills and were offered feedback on errors of writing in the spring semester. They were presented with grammatical rules and were offered reading activities but were not given feedback on errors in the fall semester. Some research suggests that feedback on errors of writing is not useful

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in the ESL situation (Semke, 1984; Kepner, 1991; Truscott, 1996). Reading activities are more effective than grammar instruction even in the EFL context (Mason & Krashen, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998). This paper examines how beginner-level learners could improve grammatical knowledge through these in-class practices in the EFL setting.

Review of Feedback on Errors

Controversy exists around the issue of whether or not feedback on errors of writing can be useful for the development of writing proficiency. With regard to the L1 situation, Krashen (1984, p.11) suggests that “feedback is useful when it is done during the writing process, i.e. between drafts. It is not useful when done at the end, i.e. comments and corrections on papers read at home and returned to students.” According to Beach (1979), it is effective for a teacher to evaluate and correct high school students’ papers to improve their writing skill, and it is especially effective to use concrete examples. Wall and Petrovsky (1981) found it useful for a teacher to evaluate revision. Krashen (1984, p.11) also suggests that “error correction limited to the final version of a composition, on the other hand, does not seem to help.” Arnold (1964) tried different kinds of corrections, that is, every error marked by the teacher, corrected and rewritten by the student, on tenth grade students’ papers and revealed there were no significant differences in writing ability.

Moreover, as for the L2 situation, Truscott (1996) emphasizes that grammar correction in L2 writing classes should be abandoned and that it is ineffective. The author also states that “the situation for L2 is the same as for L1; Grammar correction in writing courses is not helpful” (p. 333). Kepner (1991) compared two groups of students learning intermediate Spanish as a foreign language; one group was given comprehensive correction, and the other was given comments on content. The results of the test after twelve weeks of instruction showed no significant difference in grammatical accuracy. On the other hand, Fathman and Whalley (1990) insist that feedback on errors was effective in helping learners correct their grammar errors and improve their grammatical accuracy.

Review of Grammar Instruction

As for the L1 situation, some studies suggest that grammar instruction is not effective

in helping students improve L1 writing proficiency (Krashen, 1984). According to Elley et al. (1976), three groups of high school students who received three kinds of instruction in English classes (traditional grammar, transformational grammar, and no grammar) were compared. There were no differences in reading comprehension, writing style, writing mechanics and vocabulary among the groups. The authors state that “English grammar, whether traditional or transformational, has virtually no influence on the language growth of typical secondary students” (pp.17-18). Bamberg (1978) revealed that with regard to the amount of grammar students studied in high school English, there were no differences between good and poor freshman writers at UCLA. Krashen (1993) concludes that “teaching grammar has no influence on language growth of typical secondary students.” (p.22) and reading may be the only way to develop literacy skills. On the other hand, Krashen (1993) also insists that grammar instruction may be most efficient for older students and that “only more mature students will be able to develop extensive conscious knowledge” (p.72).

On the other hand, as for the L2 context, as Fotos (2002) points out, recent empirical evidence indicates that learners need explicit instruction to promote high levels of accuracy in the target language and that formal instruction prior to meaning-focused activities is effective for learners. Implicit grammar instruction is not sufficient for the EFL situation where opportunities for use of the target language outside the classroom are limited (Kaneko, 1993). An implicit approach is effective in ESL situations, while it provides a way to introduce meaning-focused language use into the traditional grammar classroom in the EFL context (Fotos, 1998). Grammar study is not necessary in L2 programs for children (Krashen, 1997).

The Effects of Reading Activities

With regard to the L1 setting, some research indicates that extensive reading contributes to the development of literacy skills (Heys, 1962; De Vries, 1970; Wittrock, 1983). According to Krashen, “increasing reading at the expense of grammar instruction has been found to result in more improvement in writing,” (1984, p.12) and given extensive free reading, readers will absorb and acquire good grammar, good spelling, and good style effortlessly (1993). He also states that “writing style is not consciously learned, but is largely absorbed, or subconsciously acquired, from reading” (1993, p.73).

Concerning the L2 situation, previous studies strongly suggest that extensive reading leads to the development of English proficiency and contributes to gains in vocabulary, reading, writing and other various aspects of proficiency in the target language (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Day & Bamford, 1998; Ghosn, 2002; Grabe, 2002).

Research

Subjects:

The students under review were enrolled in a first-year English class at Osaka Sangyo University in 2007. All freshmen are required to take an English placement test at the start of the academic year in April. The test is designed to allot students to various classes. Students' scores on the test provide a profile that indicates their level of placement. The students in this research were placed into a beginner level group. There were 21 one students in spring and 19 students in fall respectively.

Procedures in the Spring Semester:

Teaching Materials

The textbook used in the classroom was *The Workbook for Basic Grammar* (Kadooka, 2007). It is a grammar-based textbook designed to help students learn important basic grammatical concepts such as verb, tense, auxiliary verb, article, preposition and so on. It focuses on grammar rules and sentence-level writing, confirming and enforcing the grammar rules they should have learned in high school. The exercises include grammar structure to help students do sentence-level translation exercises.

Class Activities

The students were offered explanations on new words, new phrases and basic sentence patterns. After the explanations, the students were required to do exercises in translating single Japanese sentences into English. The emphasis was on grammatical rules and basic sentence patterns. After the students had completed translation exercises, the instructor checked and corrected every error in their writing. The students noticed errors and rewrote sentences on the spot. After eleven weeks of instruction the students took the same placement test as a posttest in July.

Procedures in the Fall Semester:

Teaching Materials

The textbook used in the spring semester was also used in fall for grammar study. In addition to that, easy English readers, *Foundations Reading Library* (Thomson), were used for reading practice materials. The reading materials were graded readers and the students chose what they liked out of the class library. The length of a story was around 1000 words.

Class Activities

The students were presented with grammatical rules but were not given feedback on errors. Then the students were required to read easy English reading materials in the classroom. The instructor offered approximately 20 reading books and each student chose one of them. They read the book in the classroom and wrote a book report in Japanese. The book report was a summary of a story and it only confirmed the fact that they had read the story. According to the study of extensive reading at a Japanese university, some students were required to write a summary in Japanese, and the other students were required to write a summary in English after reading an English book. As a result, a summary written in Japanese group showed better results than a summary in English group on a posttest (Mason & Krashen, 1997). After eleven weeks of instruction the students took the original placement test as a posttest in December.

Results

Table 1 presents the students' scores on both the pretest and the posttest and the difference in scores. The average scores were 27.33 on the pretest and 34 on the posttest, and the average difference in score was 6.66.

In the fall semester, out of 19 students who participated in the class, 17 students took both posttests in July and in December. Table 2 shows the test results of these students. The average score on the pretest was 27.29, that on the posttest in July was 32.58 and that on the posttest in December was 36.47. The average number of book reports was 7.41. The average gain in July (from April to July) was 5.29 and that in December (from July to December) was 3.88. The average gain in December (from April to December) was 9.17.

Table 1: Pretest and posttest results 1; 21 students and their results

Student Number	Scores		Difference in Scores
	April	July	
S1	28	38	10
S2	26	46	20
S3	28	34	6
S4	28	38	10
S5	28	36	8
S6	28	36	8
S7	28	24	-4
S8	26	30	4
S9	28	36	8
S10	28	32	4
S11	28	30	2
S12	26	38	12
S13	24	24	0
S14	26	28	2
S15	28	24	-4
S16	26	46	20
S17	28	26	-2
S18	28	42	14
S19	28	40	12
S20	28	34	6
S21	28	32	4
Average	27.33	34	6.66

Table 2: Pretest and posttest results 2 and number of books; 17 students who took both posttests in July and in December and their results

Student Number	Scores			Number of Books	Difference in Scores		
	April	July	Dec.		July – April	Dec. – July	Dec. – April
S2	26	46	36	5	20	-10	10
S3	28	34	46	4	6	12	18
S4	28	38	42	9	10	4	14
S5	28	36	48	10	8	12	20
S6	28	36	40	6	8	4	12
S7	28	24	38	10	-4	14	10
S8	26	30	38	10	4	8	12
S9	28	36	34	8	8	-2	6
S10	28	32	34	8	4	2	6
S11	28	30	32	9	2	2	4
S12	26	38	32	7	12	-6	6
S13	24	24	14	7	0	-10	-10
S14	26	28	28	7	2	0	2
S15	28	24	42	6	-4	18	14
S17	28	26	36	8	-2	10	8
S19	28	40	36	5	12	-4	8
S21	28	32	44	7	4	12	16
Average	27.29	32.58	36.47	7.41	5.29	3.88	9.17

Some students with poor attendance were unable to complete all required book reports. Table 3 shows the results of the students who were able to complete more than half the book reports that were required. The average score on the pretest was 27.28, that on the posttest in July was 31 and that on the posttest in December was 35.85. The average number of book reports was 8. The average gain in July (from April to July) was 3.71 and that in December (from July to December) was 4.85. The average gain in December (from April to December) was 8.57. The gain (from April to July) in Table 2, (5.29), was larger than that in Table 3, (3.71), while the gain (from July to December) in Table 2, (3.88), was smaller than that in Table 3, (4.85).

Table 3: Pretest and posttest results 3 and number of books; 14 students who completed more than 5 book reports and their results

Student Number	Scores			Number of Books	Difference in Scores		
	April	July	Dec.		July – April	Dec. – July	Dec. – April
S4	28	38	42	9	10	4	14
S5	28	36	48	10	8	12	20
S6	28	36	40	6	8	4	12
S7	28	24	38	10	-4	14	10
S8	26	30	38	10	4	8	12
S9	28	36	34	8	8	-2	6
S10	28	32	34	8	4	2	6
S11	28	30	32	9	2	2	4
S12	26	38	32	7	12	-6	6
S13	24	24	14	7	0	-10	-10
S14	26	28	28	7	2	0	2
S15	28	24	42	6	-4	18	14
S17	28	26	36	8	-2	10	8
S21	28	32	44	7	4	12	16
Average	27.28	31	35.85	8	3.71	4.85	8.57

Conclusion

Regarding intermediate-level learners, Kepner (1991) argues that grammar correction is not effective and not helpful in the FL situation. Students who have already reached the intermediate level could improve in writing considerably in quality as well as quantity through fluency-first activities without detailed error correction (Tokiooka, 1997). However, the findings of this study indicate that beginner level students could derive some gains

from grammar instruction along with feedback on errors. Single sentence translation tasks may contribute to learning grammatical rules. As Krashen (1993) points out, grammar instruction may be most efficient for older students in the L1 situation. In the FL situation, direct and explicit grammar instruction appears to be efficient for older beginner-level students. Krashen (1984) also states that feedback is not useful if a teacher reads students' papers at home and returns them to students. To make feedback useful, it is crucial to give students the opportunity to notice the errors because "whether feedback is effective or not depends on the students' reaction to the error corrections" (Hayashi, 1999, p. 33). It seems to be essential for students to notice errors and rewrite sentences immediately when the teacher gives feedback on errors. On the other hand, according to Fathman and Whalley (1990), students who were not given feedback on errors by the teacher improved in fluency on their rewrites much more than those who were given feedback. It is necessary to promote a balanced development of accuracy and fluency. With regard to extensive reading activities, the beginner level students who completed more than half the required book reports achieved more gains in December even though they recorded small gains in July. They appear to have received substantial benefits from extensive reading.

This article presented a small-scale study designed to examine the effectiveness of feedback on errors and extensive reading in enhancing beginners' English grammatical ability. It can be stated that explicit grammar instruction, as well as extensive reading, may have been helpful to beginner-level students in this study. However, the pretest and the posttest measuring mainly grammatical knowledge could not determine whether students had improved in other English abilities through these in-class activities. Moreover, since there was no control group in this study, future research on the role of explicit grammar instruction along with extensive reading in developing other skills is needed.

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