

Grammar Learning through Fluency-First Instruction and Form-Focused Instruction

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to present some findings concerning errors produced by intermediate learners of English. The effects of fluency-first instruction and form-focused instruction on grammatical accuracy in writing are to be examined. The English language performance of students in a foreign language setting was analyzed by classifying errors into categories. The written product was rated on such features as article, sentence structure, mechanics, agreement and vocabulary. Though modest improvement in some components appeared, the form-focused instruction did not influence improvement in accuracy of structure.

Introduction

Writing plays a critical role in the global community. People sometimes send an e-mail message instead of making a call in many contexts. Writing is highly valued in educational settings, while the employers need to make decisions about potential employees based on how well they can communicate in writing in business settings (Alderson & Bachman, 2002). Though grammatical and structural errors in speaking are sometimes overlooked, accuracy in writing is expected (Byrd & Reid, 1998). The written form of the language should be more correct than spoken language.

The new revision of the course of study guidelines insists on the development of communicative abilities. It is obvious that in recent years the focus of English instruction has been on communicative competence, not on grammatical ability. As a result, the students affected by the new course of study guidelines seem to lack sufficient grammatical knowledge. Questionnaires administered by Writing Research

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Group indicate that a lot of students believe that it is necessary to acquire grammatical rules in order to improve English writing ability (Writing Research Group, 1995; 2003). In this paper, grammatical ability of the students is to be measured through analytic scoring. Errors produced by the students were classified and put into categories. The focus of attention was on article, sentence structure, mechanics, agreement and vocabulary. As a result, the most serious error, sentence structure error was on the rise for the past decade. Moreover, the improvement in the grammatical accuracy in writing can be seen in some components, while a negative value can be seen in improvement of writing accuracy in other components through form-focused instruction.

Questionnaires

The Course of Study guidelines are announced by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology almost every ten years. The revision of the guidelines affects the instruction of English at secondary school. In the 1989 guidelines, the 6th revision, the words of “communication abilities” appeared for the first time in the course of study. In the next 1998 guidelines for lower secondary school and in the next 1999 guidelines for upper secondary school, the 7th revision, the word “practical” was added to further develop communication abilities emphasized in the 6th revision of 1989.¹⁾

Writing Research Group conducted the survey of the students’ writing experience in 1994 and 2002. With regard to the survey conducted in 1994, the subjects were 1,018 students from seven universities for the pretest and the questionnaire in April and 746 students for the posttest and the questionnaire in December. In 2002, 327 students from five universities for the pretest and the questionnaire in April and 281 students for the posttest and the questionnaire in December provided some data for the research. The contents of the questionnaires in 1994 and 2002 were the same. The students were asked to respond to a 24-item questionnaire in April and a 20-item questionnaire in December. The students were asked on a scale 1 to 4 or 1 to 5 to what extent they had had English writing experience, and so on. The students in 1994 were affected by the 5th revision of the course of study guidelines, while those in 2002 were affected by the 6th revision of the guidelines. Tables 1-4 are taken from the studies conducted by

Writing Research Group (1995; 2003).

Results of the Questionnaires in April:

Regarding the past writing experience in English, Table 1 indicates that writing experience based on a single-sentence level decreased, and experience in translating Japanese sentences into English with an emphasis on grammar rules also decreased. On the other hand, more students had opportunities for writing on topics in 2002 than those in 1994. As for writing, there seemed to be emphasis on the development of fluent writing through communication-oriented instruction.

With regard to “factors to be emphasized in practicing English writing as a class activity,” Table 2 suggested that all components, that is, grammatical knowledge, vocabulary and content were not strongly emphasized in 2002, compared with those of 1994.

Table 1 : Experience of Writing Practices in English

Questionnaire in April	1994 (N=982)	2002 (N=327)	gain
	much + some	much + some	
1. Translating Japxanese Single Sentences into English	82.4%	75.8%	- 6.6%
2. Translating Japanese Using Grammar Rules	75.4%	69.7%	- 5.7%
3. Writing on Given Topics	47.6%	58.1%	10.5%

Table 2 : Factors to be Emphasized in Practicing English Writing

Questionnaire in April	1994 (N=982)	2002 (N=327)	gain
	much + some	much + some	
1. Grammar	82.3%	77.4%	- 4.9%
2. Vocabulary	75.0%	72.5%	- 2.5%
3. Content	81.8%	77.0%	- 4.8%

Results of the Questionnaires in December:

After attending classes involving some writing practices, the students were asked to respond to a 20-item questionnaire in December. Tables 3 and 4 indicated some results of the questionnaires administered in December.

Concerning “factors the students find most difficult in writing essays,” Table 3 indicated that the students both in 1994 and in 2002 felt almost the same way. They

thought that the most difficult factor was vocabulary, followed by grammar rules. The course of study guidelines was revised and insisted on communicative abilities. However, the vocabulary size as language elements in the course of study for foreign languages has been reduced consistently. It is reasonable to assume that the revision would not help students develop sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge.

As for “useful practices for improving English writing ability,” Table 4 suggested that the figures for all components did not change markedly during the last decade. Weigle states (2002, p.7) that “one cannot write in a second language without knowing at least something about the grammar and vocabulary of that language.” The students describe reasonable and understandable impressions that it is necessary to learn grammar rules and also to write much more on topics. They realize well that they lack sufficient grammatical knowledge.

Table 3 : What Factors Do You Find Most Difficult in Writing Essays?

Questionnaire in December	1994 (N=751)	2002 (N=281)	gain
	much + some	much + some	
1. Grammar Rules	88.5%	89.6%	1.1%
2. Vocabulary	94.7%	94.7%	0%
3. Punctuation	62.4%	64.4%	2%
4. Content	83.2%	85.1%	1.9%
5. Organization	68.5%	69.4%	0.9%

Table 4 : Useful Practices for Improving English Writing Ability

Questionnaire in December	1994 (N=751)	2002 (N=281)	gain
	much + some	much + some	
1. Grammar Rules	20.5%	29.9%	+ 9.4%
2. Idioms	17.7%	15.3%	- 2.4%
3. Vocabulary	52.3%	55.2%	+ 2.9%
4. Writing Single Sentences	8.4%	10.0%	+ 1.6%
5. Writing Short Paragraphs	24.2%	18.1%	- 6.1%
6. Writing on Topics	34.5%	44.1%	+ 9.6%

Research on Freshmen's Grammatical Accuracy in Writing

Subjects:

The students (English Majors) in 1995, 2002 and 2005 under review were enrolled in

a first-year English class at the same university. The numbers of participants were 34 students in 1995, 78 students in 2002 and 70 students in 2005. All these students were freshmen with some sophomores included. These students were compared concerning grammatical ability.

Procedures:

The in-class writing practice was conducted in May, and October in 1995. The allocated time was 15 minutes with additional 5 minutes for revising. In 2002 and 2005, the timed writing, that is, essay writing was conducted as the pretest in April. It was carried out in the same way. The allocated time was 15 minutes with additional 5 minutes for revising. Five more minutes were given to complete unfinished sentences. They could re-read and transform what they wrote but were not allowed to add additional sentences. The students were encouraged to write as many words as possible without caring about grammatical correctness. The same essay writing was conducted as the posttest in December in the same way. Their essays were examined on grammatical knowledge through analytical assessment. A student's performance in different grammatical aspects of writing was assessed. To measure each component, errors were put into categories and counted. The components of grammatical knowledge were article, sentence structure, mechanics, agreement and vocabulary. As identifying errors is not easy, errors described and explained were chosen.

The students of 1995 and 2002 were reviewed and the results were shown with regard to writing fluency and analysis of grammatical errors (Tokioka, 1997; 2003). In this article, the students of 2005 are to be reviewed in the same way and the results obtained in this research are to be compared with those of 1995 and 2002.

Results:

As for error gravity, word order is often the most serious error, while article errors are the most difficult for ESL students to remediate because English article rules are very complex (Byrd & Reid, 1998). Ellis (1997) also states that global errors, which violate the structure of a sentence and make it difficult to process, are more serious than others. Probably "sentence structure" is the most serious error category among these five components in this study.

As shown in Table 5, some characteristics can be seen in the groups of the students in 1995, 2002 and 2005. Though article, mechanics, agreement and vocabulary are diverse in their figures, the figures for sentence structure increase steadily. Through an analysis of structure errors produced by freshmen in April, it is assumed that grammatical ability have been declining for the past decade.

Table 5 : Errors per 100 words

	1995 May N=34	2002 April N=78	2005 April N=70
Article	0.5	2.63	1.23
Sentence Structure	1.5	1.76	3.03
Mechanics	0.9	1.53	1.08
Agreement	0.6	1.02	1.58
Vocabulary	1.0	2.48	1.65

Fluency-First or Form-Focused Instruction

Moreover, the effects of fluency-first instruction and form-focused instruction on grammatical accuracy are to be investigated. The students were given fluency-first instruction in 1995. In 2002 the students were offered fluency-first instruction as well as form-focused instruction, while the students in 2005 received form-focused instruction and grammar-translation instruction. After attending classes involving some writing practices, they took the posttest. As for the students in 2005, the numbers of participants in the pretest and the posttest were 70 and 60 respectively, and 55 students who took both the pretest and the posttest were reviewed.

As shown in Tables 6 and 7, errors in sentence structure decreased through instruction involving fluency-first practices. On the other hand, Table 8 showed that errors in sentence structure increased. Fluency-first practices may well be useful for improving accuracy in writing. The fact that the students in 2005 did not have enough grammatical ability in April compared with those in 1995 and 2002 might contribute to the result. They could not achieve improvements in writing accuracy of sentence structure through form-focused instruction.

Homburg found (1984) five variables that discriminated among three different levels of writing ability: moderately serious errors per T-unit, dependent clauses per

Table 6 : Errors per 100 words in 1995 (Tokioka, 1997)

	May N=34	October N=34	Gain Rate
Article	0.5	0.7	40.0%
Sentence Structure	1.5	0.9	- 40.0%
Mechanics	0.9	1.2	33.3%
Agreement	0.6	0.4	- 33.3%
Vocabulary	1.0	0.5	- 50.0%

Table 7 : Errors per 100 words in 2002 (Tokioka, 2003)

	April N=78	December N=78	Gain Rate
Article	2.63	2.83	7.6%
Sentence Structure	1.76	1.34	- 23.9%
Mechanics	1.53	0.87	- 43.1%
Agreement	1.02	1.16	13.7%
Vocabulary	2.48	2.06	- 16.9%

Table 8 : Errors per 100 words in 2005

	April N=55	December N=55	Gain Rate
Article	1.37	1.83	33.57%
Sentence Structure	2.99	3.94	31.77%
Mechanics	1.13	1.34	18.58%
Agreement	1.65	1.45	- 12.12%
Vocabulary	1.67	1.52	- 8.98%

composition, words per sentence, coordinating conjunctions per composition, and error-free T-units per composition. According to Ishikawa (1995), one of the best objective measurement of written samples produced by EFL students was the number of error-free clauses per composition. Table 9 presents the results of some categories. The mean number of error-free clauses per composition rose from 8.54 to 9.16. The length of a sentence and a clause increased as both words per sentence and words per clause improved. With regard to some variables, improvement in writing through form-focused instruction appeared on the students.

Conclusion

E-mail communication can be useful in a real-life situation and accuracy in writing

Table 9 : Results of 2005

	April (N=55)	December (N=55)	Gain
Words per composition	121.87	141.72	19.85
Words per sentence	8.56	11.51	2.95
Words per clause	6.83	7.81	0.98
Clauses per sentence	1.25	1.47	0.22
Sentences per composition	14.23	12.30	- 1.93
Clauses per composition	17.81	18.14	0.33
Error-free single sentences per composition	5.09	3.38	- 1.71
Error-free complex sentences per composition	0.83	2.20	1.37
Error-free sentences per composition	5.92	4.89	- 1.03
Error-free clauses per composition	8.54	9.16	0.62

seems to be significant in business settings. What is ungrammatical in written English may be acceptable in spoken English (Milroy & Milroy, 1985). According to Weigle (2002, p.17), “writing is highly valued in educational settings, and the standardization of writing means that accuracy in writing is frequently more important than accuracy in speaking.” Second language learners need to know at least something about the grammar and vocabulary of that language in order to write (Weigle, 2002). The students under review realize that they lack sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge and need to acquire grammar rules and rich vocabulary.

Controversy exists around the issue of whether or not grammar instruction can be useful for developing writing proficiency. Some studies found grammar instruction did not help to increase accuracy, while other studies found form-focused instruction was effective for improvement in writing (Ellis, 1997). According to Purpura (2004), a lot of studies showed there was a clear advantage for learners receiving explicit grammar instruction. In a small-scale study on intermediate level students in this article, form-focused instruction could not contribute to reducing sentence structure errors in writing. However, the results of the questionnaires suggested that the students thought practices for acquiring sufficient grammatical and lexical knowledge were useful. Although it is difficult to assess the exact contribution of grammar instruction influence to improvement in writing accuracy, class activities involving explicit grammar practices would be desirable for those students.

As for reading ability, Hayes (1996) insists on the importance of reading and states that writers cannot revise global errors because of poor reading skills. Learners cannot self-correct errors without sufficient reading ability. ESL learners with limited reading skills cannot correct their own errors. It is crucial to enhance reading proficiency along with lexical knowledge to improve learners' grammatical accuracy in writing. Activities with an emphasis only on grammar exercises would not lead to the reduction of errors. Class activities that value fluency as well as accuracy may have some effects on writing ability. It can be stated that more research is needed to examine the relationship between reading and grammar abilities in a more detailed way.

Notes

1) Available: <http://www.mext.go.jp/english/shotou/030301.htm>

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