

The Effects of Classroom Oral Practice on Adolescent Novice Japanese EFL Learners' Grammatical Proficiency

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Abstract

This study investigates the effects of oral practice on the development of grammatical proficiency of eighth graders at a Japanese boys' junior high school. It analyzes the results of the annual grammar review test taken by the eighth graders at the beginning of three different academic years: 2009, 2010 and 2011 (hereafter referred to as Class-09, 10 and 11 respectively). They were taught the same series of grammatical items in the so-called grammar-translation method, but only Class-11 was offered frequent opportunities to do oral reading in class on an every day basis. The results indicate that Class-11 performed better in the review test than both Class-09 and 10. Whereas the t-test showed no statistically significant difference between Class-09 and 10, the t-tests showed statistically significant difference both between Class-09 and 11, and between Class-10 and 11. The histogram of the results for each year seemed to suggest that oral reading would help relatively slower learners to understand the basics of target grammatical items.

Keywords

Junior High School Learners, Grammar Teaching, Oral Reading

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In Japan, the design of ELT in the secondary education is officially decided and announced by the Japanese government in the form of *Course of Study*. The overall governmental policy of junior high school English course is "to develop students' basic communication abilities such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, deepening their understanding of language and culture and fostering a positive attitude toward communication through foreign languages" (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2008). The government seems to be attempting to develop students' ability for real communication.

However, in spite of such a governmental policy, teachers in Japan opt to conduct their lessons in a

so-called grammar-translation style, employing teacher-centered lessons with explicit grammar instructions and mechanical drills (Sakui, 2004). Such inclination to the teaching of grammar is said to be due to the long-standing trend that school ELT in Japan has had to help the students pass paper-based university entrance examinations, which include quite a few number of grammar manipulative questions (Gorsuch, 2000).

Unfortunately, it has been argued that such deductive grammar teaching might not be functioning as well as teachers would like it to be. Namely, it is argued that the grammar-translation method draws on the notion that language learning is a process in which new language systems accumulate straightforwardly in the learner's language system as his/her learning proceeds (Willis and Willis, 1996), but it has been suggested that language learning should be a complex and recursive procedure and that it cannot be mastered in such a simple way (Nunan, 1998). Accordingly, several other methods have been suggested in the literature of ELT, such as Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Learning, Consciousness-Raising Approach, etc.

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine whether learners' grammatical proficiency could be improved through classroom oral reading, i.e., through reading written text out loud. Oral reading has come into fashion in Japanese ELT since around the year 2000 (Kobayashi, 2006), and it has been reported as an effective way to strengthen not only the learners' awareness of the phonological aspects of English, such as sound-symbol relationships, the rhythm, intonation, stress, and the linking of the English sound (Izumi, 2009), but also reading skills and the awareness of basic structure of English sentences (Griffin, 1992). The recent trend in Japan for oral reading with the reported advantages of it would encourage junior high school English teachers in Japan to employ it more frequently in

their classroom lessons. Therefore, It would be worth investigating the potential of the oral reading for the improvement of learners' grammatical knowledge.

2. Procedure

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted at a private boys' junior high school in Tokyo called Shiba Junior High School (hereafter referred to as SJH). The participants were students in the eighth grade at the beginning of three different academic years: 2009, 2010, and 2011. The number of the eighth graders in 2009 (hereafter referred to as Class-09) was 304, that in 2010 (hereafter referred to as Class-10) was 283, and that in 2011 (hereafter referred to as Class-11) was 288. The school gives an entrance examination every year, and the Z scores of the entrance examinations for Class-09, Class-10, Class-11 were roughly equivalent. Almost all the students in 2009, 2010, and 2011 were taught English for the first time when in the seventh grade. When they took the annual review test the results of which were used for this study, the students had just finished their learning at the seventh grade.

2.2 Methods

2.2.1 Target Grammatical Items

At SJH, the annual syllabus for each grade is already prepared at the beginning of each academic year. All the three years followed the identical syllabus for the seventh grader. The main grammar points listed in the syllabus for the seventh graders are be-verbs, basic verbs, basic adverbs, basic prepositions, the present and past tenses, the present and past progressive tenses, interrogative sentences, wh-interrogatives, basic auxiliary verbs, comparative, superlative, existential "there", countable and uncountable nouns, and the articles and the determiners of English.

2.2.2 Materials

The teaching of those grammatical items was conducted with a textbook called *Birdland Junior English I* (Yoshida, 2008; hereafter *BJEI*).

It is composed of 14 chapters, each of which has three or four smaller units called *Focus*, a set of three to seven example sentences that contain the target grammar point(s) of each chapter, and a section called *Power Up*, which is a set of short reading passages.

2.2.3 Grammar Teaching

For the teaching of grammar, Class-09, 10 and 11 were all offered a grammar-translation style of teaching. Each grammar point was presented through the analyses of *Focus(es)* in the so-called grammar-translation method: target points were delivered explicitly through grammatical analyses

of example sentences in *Focuses*. During and after the grammar explanations, students in all the three years were made to do grammar exercises, which were all adopted from three grammar workbooks called *Birdland Junior English I Kansei-mondaisyu* (Editorial Dep. of Buneido, 2008; *Birdland Junior English I: Workbook for mastering grammar*) and *Bumpo-pattern-rensei Vol. 1 and 2* (Editorial Dep. of Ikushinsha, 1997; *Grammar Pattern Practice Vol. 1 and 2*). *Kansei-mondaisyu I* is a grammar exercise book attached to *BJEI*. *Bumpo-pattern-rensei Vol. 1 and 2* are grammar exercise books focused on word-reordering and translation practice. The same questions out of these three workbooks were selected among all the three years and assigned to the participants both in class and as homework.

2.2.4 Reading Passages

In all the three academic years, the students were made to read one *Power Up* per chapter. The length of the *Power Ups* selected varied from 30 to 160 words. Whereas Class-09 and 10 read the same set of ten *Power Ups*, Class-11 read twelve *Power Ups*, including six passages out of the ten Class-09 and 10 read.

2.2.5 Oral Reading

Whereas *Focuses* were dealt with for grammatical analyses and *Power Ups* for reading comprehension respectively in Class-09 and 10, time for those kinds of tasks was minimized in Class-11 in order to set aside a certain amount of time for oral reading. The oral reading of *Focuses* was done with the textbooks, and *Power Ups* with printed materials respectively. In the printed materials for *Power Ups*, every sentence in the passages was divided into sense groups with Japanese annotation of every group given below each one. For both *Focuses* and *Power Ups*, the style of oral reading was mainly choral and individual reading.

2.3 Test

For the purpose of investigating the learners' grammatical knowledge, the data analyzed in this study were the records of the annual review test the school conducts at the beginning of every academic year. This paper-based test covers the previous year's English grammatical functions, and all the students at this school are supposed to take this review test. In the year 2009, 2010 and 2011, the same questions have confidentially been used in order to compare the English proficiency of students in the three years.

3. Results

The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The Results of the Review Test

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Class-09	304	70.9	16.1
Class-10	283	70.4	17.6
Class-11	288	74.7	12.8

The results of the review test were Class-09 ($n=304$, $M=70.9$, $SD=16.1$), Class-10 ($n=283$, $M=70.4$, $SD=17.6$), and Class-11 ($n=288$, $M=74.7$, $SD=12.8$). The t-test showed no statistically significant difference between Class-09 and Class-10: $t(570) = -.264$, ns, two-tailed test, for the review test. However, the t-tests showed statistically significant difference both between Class-09 and Class-11: $t(573) = 3.182$, $p < .01^{**}$, two-tailed test, and between Class-10 and Class-11: $t(514) = 3.233$, $p < .01^{**}$, two-tailed test. The histogram for each class is shown in Figure 1, 2 and 3. The integrated line chart for the three years is shown in Figure 4.

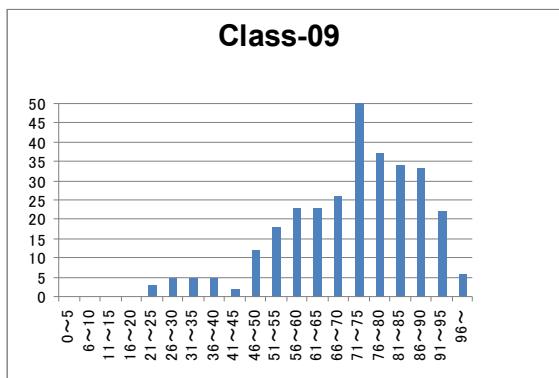


Figure 1: Results of the Review Tests: Class-09

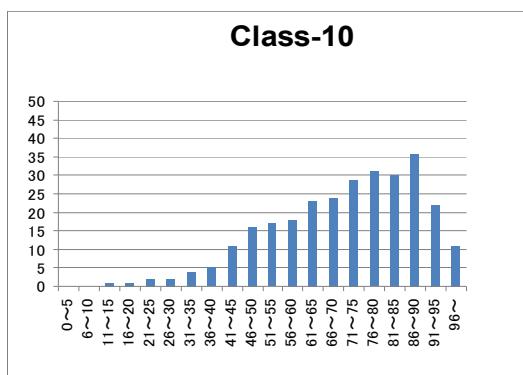


Figure 2: Results of the Review Tests: Class-10

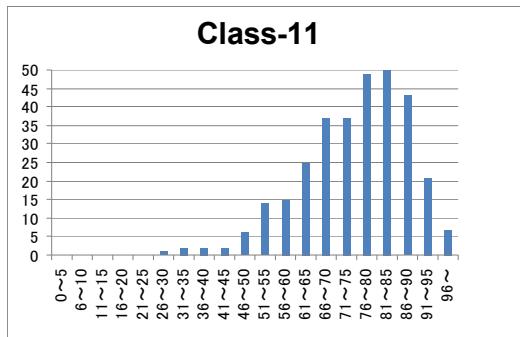


Figure 3: Results of the Review Tests: Class-11

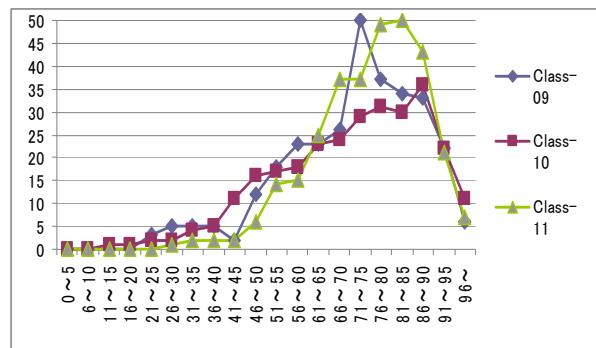


Figure 4: Integrated Line Chart for Class-09, 10 and 11

4 Discussions and Further Research

The results indicate that Class-11, who did frequent oral reading throughout one academic year, performed better than both Class-09 and 10. Let us ponder the reasons for these statistically significant differences. Firstly, it could be possible to say that oral reading that Class-11 underwent was particularly effective on slower learners' basic grammar learning.

The integrated line chart of Class-09, 10, and 11 shows that Class-11 had the smallest number of students whose score was 0 to 60 points (Class-09: 73, Class-77, Class-11:42). Provided that those learners gained scores from relatively basic level of questions, it could be assumed that oral reading helped the students with low scores understand the very basics of each grammatical item.

Secondly, what could also be worthwhile highlighting is that the numbers of students with high scores (86 to 100) for the three academic years are not very different :Class-09: 61, Class-69, and Class-11:71. The chi-square test shows no statistically significant differences between the three pairs of the three academic years. Suppose that those fast learners gained scores from not only fairly basic questions but also questions about relatively complicated or detailed types of target grammar items, these results would demonstrate that although Class-11 had shorter time for grammar explanations and for practices on grammar workbooks, their understandings of relatively advanced aspects of each grammar item were roughly equivalent to that of Class-09 and 10.

5 For Further Research

This study remains to be investigated. First, it would be worthwhile to examine on which grammar points oral-reading-based lessons would be more effective than lessons with less oral reading and more grammar explanations. Insight on this question would be gained by analyzing the types of questions in the annual review test that Class-11 specifically had high scores.

Secondly, it would also be worth investigating at what age of students or in what grade of students

oral-reading lessons would be effective. Communicative Language teaching is said to be more effective for young learners and learners with low intelligent quotient, IQ, while a grammar-based teaching method, the so-called grammar-translation method, has been argued to be more effective for matured learners, such as adult learners or young learners with high IQ (Thornbury, 1999; Ando et al, 1992). Provided that the higher grade a student is in, or the more complicated the target grammar items become, the less effective oral-reading lessons become, there might be a threshold point where grammar explanations would prove more effective than oral reading.

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