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Instruction through Written Grammar Exercises and its Effect on Listening Proficiency

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Abstract: Written workbook type exercises give learners discrete-level practice with various grammar forms, vocabulary items, and structural features of English. The question arises, though, whether such exercises also aid learners in building language skills that do not involve writing. This paper summarizes a quantitative study seeking to shed light on whether devoting class time to written work in a university communication class helps students to improve their listening ability.

Key words : Worksheets, written exercises, grammar instruction, language acquisition, listening proficiency.

1. General area for investigation

The role of grammar in language teaching and learning has long been a fiercely argued subject – perhaps, as authors such as Wajnryb (1992) contend, even the most hotly debated. Over the years, curriculum development in language teaching has evolved from the structural approach to the structural-situational approach, then to a communicative approach (Richards, 2001). Even with the increased attention paid to a more communicative approach to teaching, however, modern researchers assert that grammar instruction on a discrete level still plays a role in fostering language acquisition (Ellis, 2005), provided that it is part of a wider teaching approach and is put into meaningful communicative context (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

In Japan, even in the present communicative-approach era, “grammar for grammar’s sake” is still taught as a discrete skill, without being blended into an overall effort at helping learners’ language proficiency (Hato, 2005; Sakui, 2007), although some efforts have been made over the past two decades to move beyond such an approach (Monbukagakusho, 1999). To stop overemphasizing grammar does not mean, however, that grammar instruction should be set aside entirely.

When grammar’s role in language teaching and learning is considered, a question arises as to which specific methods of teaching grammar can aid in overall language acquisition. Specifically, there is a question as to whether any relationship exists between grammar instruction in written form and improved performance in other language skills, such as listening.

2. Rationale

Many ESL/EFL publishers have produced textbook series that feature workbooks as part of the series’ supplementary materials. Prominent publishers in the EFL/ESL field -- such as Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, McGraw-Hill, and Pearson Longman -- offer such workbooks as

supplementary learning resources for some of their major course book series. These workbooks, which not only continue to be produced in traditional printed form but also more recently on electronic applications and CD-ROM, typically contain single-sentence “fill in the blank” exercises, as well as exercises involving the writing of full but out-of-context sentences, that focus on some grammatical structure.

Also, in my teaching experience, I have seen instructors create their own worksheets containing workbook-type exercises that focus heavily on grammar, particularly on verb tenses. I have often been asked by various Japanese and Korean co-teachers with whom I have worked to produce such worksheets specifically designed for our own classes.

Because workbooks and workbook-like exercises on computerized media are offered so prominently by publishers as language teaching and learning tools, and because self-designed worksheets seem to be frequently prepared by teachers for use in their own classes, the question arises as to how (or even if) the use of focused written tasks in workbooks and worksheets really help learners become better communicators.

3. Literature review

Homstad and Thorson (1996) assert that positive effects from written exercises have been observed in qualitative research involving advanced learners of German as well as Scandinavian languages. Their observations involved learners producing somewhat lengthy works of composition and creative writing, not isolated sentences featuring a grammar focus. Nonetheless, they concluded there is evidence that language input and output in written form can “cross over” in terms of increased proficiency in other skills. They also posit that many teachers don’t have students do writing activities because they’re too bothersome and/or too frustrating and difficult for students.

Other researchers posit that written exercises have a positive effect on overall language acquisition, though not necessarily with regard to listening proficiency. Lee (2011) found that for a class of roughly 30 Chinese polytechnic university students, written exercises when combined with task-based instruction resulted in better vocabulary retention than a communicative approach alone. Hashemzadeh (2012) studied the effectiveness of different vocabulary-retention exercises with beginner adult learners in Iran, and found particular success was yielded from written fill-in-the-blank activities. Eslit (2012) found that workbook exercises aided in overall language acquisition for Filipino college students who had previously struggled with English features such as verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, prepositions, and reading comprehension.

Cummins (2003) advocates engaging children in reading texts rather than worksheets and drills in order to promote comprehension and academic language. Pardo (2004) and Merkle and Jeffreys (2001) contended that worksheet activities deal in discrete languages and don’t allow learners the opportunity to benefit from scaffolding or to make lexical text connections.

4. Research question

This study addresses the following research question: Does the use of *written* grammar exercises, as found in published workbooks and teacher-generated worksheets, help learners improve their listening skills during a 15-week university-level general communication class?

5. Subjects and methodology

The study involves a small-scale quantitative study involving second-year university students at a four-year technology institute in northern Japan. On the first day of class at the start of the semester, the experimental-group and control-group classes were both given the same pre-test, a copy of which is found in Appendix A. The teacher read 22 questions to the students, who chose the matching answer for each question by marking a multiple-choice answer sheet. The questions and answers featured language that both classes would go on to study during the first half of the semester.

Taking one 90-minute English Communication class per week, two groups of students were taught virtually identical four-skills lessons with identical materials, but with one difference – an experimental group (41 students) were given written worksheets to complete in class, while a control group (40 students) were not given such worksheets.

As the semester proceeded, the experimental group was given time in their classes to complete exercises in their workbook as well as worksheet exercises prepared by the instructor. These worksheets featured language points and structures that appeared on the pre-test and that would, of course, also be found on the post-test. The experimental-group learners and the instructor also went over the answers to these exercises in class soon after they were completed. Thus, the workbook/worksheet exercises and the following feedback would constitute the treatment for this quantitative study. Samples of worksheet exercises given to the experimental-group students can be found in Appendix B.

After eight weeks of classes, a midterm exam was given, the listening portion of which served as the post-test for this study. The post-test contained 20 of the 22 questions that appeared on the pre-test (it was necessary to omit two pre-test questions because the language involved in those questions were not covered in class, as had been originally planned). A copy of the post-test can be seen in Appendix C.

6. Results

The average pre-test and post-test scores (based on a maximum test score of 100) for the experimental and control groups, along with the average rate of improvement for both groups, were as follows:

	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Rate of Improvement
Experimental	53.0	73.6	20.6
Control	47.8	74.3	26.5

7. Conclusion

The pre-test and post-test average scores for each group suggest that using worksheets in class did not seem to aid in improving learner's grasp of language taught in class over an eight-week period. In particular, worksheets did not seem to help students improve their listening skills; in fact, if anything the use of worksheets seemed to actually hinder listening improvement.

One possible reason for this outcome is that spending class time doing worksheets, followed by more time spent going over the worksheet answers, minimized time and opportunities for learners to practice listening (not to mention speaking). In terms of audible language, the time that the experimental-group students spent on worksheets was basically a form of "down time"; while there were opportunities for listening and speaking when the worksheet answers were being checked, it mainly involved simply

reading what was on the sheets – this portion of each class did not give students a chance to build listening in a communicative context, and in fact lessened time and opportunity for learners to do so.

8. Pedagogical implications

Should worksheets and other written worksheet-like activities be avoided? Probably not, because it is quite possible that while the specific tasks and worksheets used in this study did not contribute to improved listening proficiency, different tasks and written exercises might produce alternate results. In addition, as researchers such as Homstad and Thorson (1996) have concluded, written exercises do serve certain purposes in helping learners acquire English. Written exercises and worksheets may be beneficial to students as homework; they can also be designed for use in other activities after students complete their written portions – for instance, worksheets can serve as in-class questionnaires where students need to write the questions before using the sheets to survey their classmates.

9. Limitations of this study

This study was limited to testing learners on their listening comprehension; studying whether worksheets help students become better speakers would be a worthwhile research effort, but turned out to be impractical for this study given the large class sizes and the fact that they met only once a week.

This study involved a limited number of learners – only two classes each with roughly 40 students. Although the research described here gives good insight into worksheets' role in building listening skill, more in-depth research involving a larger sample of learners would be needed.

A logistical situation perhaps became an issue with regard to this survey – the experimental group's classroom was significantly smaller than the one to which the control group was assigned. The former group's room also contained single-unit desk-chairs that occupied virtually every square inch of the floor, making it impossible for the students to comfortably form small groups, as the control group was able to do. It is not certain whether this classroom-layout situation had any effect on the study results, but making the physical conditions of the experimental and control groups' classrooms as similar to each other as possible would be best, in order to eliminate the possibility of physical-movement limitations "contaminating" overall class performance.

Another potential problem involves students actually completing the worksheets. Every effort was made to circulate around the room to see if the sheets were being completed, and from what could be seen, it appears they were. There may have been at least a few students in the experimental group, however, who either didn't "bear down" on their worksheets and try their best on them, or didn't complete them at all. Some students, given that they were in a Communication class, may not have seen any need or importance in completing the worksheets they were given – which if true would be fair enough for them to think so. Ultimately, the best language classes are ones in which learners' needs are being served and their interest and motivation are at high levels – and if doing worksheets in class detract from that at all, it removes a great deal of justification for even using them in class in the first place.

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Appendix A. Pre-test listening test, answer sheet and questions.

1	<i>Read to students: How many brothers and sisters do you have?</i> a) Yes, I do. b) My sister has many friends. c) I have two siblings. d) Yes, I have.
2	<i>Read to students: Who do you live with?</i> a) My parents. b) Yes, I do. c) I live in Muroran. d) No, I'm not.
3	<i>Read to students: Where do you live?</i> a) I live in Takasago. b) With my sister. c) I've lived here for 4 years. d) No, I don't.
4	<i>Read to students: Do you get along with your relatives?</i> a) I didn't get them anything. b) Mostly, yes. c) Yes, I am. d) I have a lot of relatives.
5	<i>Read to students: What is Julia like?</i> a) Yes, she is. b) She likes skiing and shopping. c) Yes, she does. d) She's smart and funny.
6	<i>Read to students: How often do you talk to your friends?</i> a) Almost every day. b) We talk about lots of things. c) Yes, we do. d) I talked to them yesterday.
7	<i>Read to students: What do you and your friends do for fun?</i> a) I think karaoke is fun. b) No, we don't. c) We go skiing. d) It's the most fun thing to do.
8	<i>Read to students: When I meet your brother, are there any topics I should avoid?</i> a) You'll like him. b) My brother's name is Tim. c) Yes, he does. d) He's doesn't like talking about work.
9	<i>Read to students: What do you do when you meet someone?</i> a) I bow or shake hands. b) I meet him every month. c) I met her last year. d) Yes, I do.
10	<i>Read to students: Where did Mark go to high school?</i> a) Yes, he did. b) He went to Seishin High School. c) He was a good student. d) Five years ago.
11	<i>Read to students: What do George and Donna have in common?</i> a) They know each other. b) Yes, they're common names. c) They're Canadian. d) No, they're not.
12	<i>Read to students: How did you do on the test?</i> a) I took the test yesterday. b) Believe it or not, I got a 98! c) Yes, I did. d) I did it at school.
13	<i>Read to students: How can we improve the education system?</i> a) More technology in classrooms would be nice. b) Yes, we should. c) It's fine. d) I don't like studying.
14	<i>Read to students: Do you think Japan will win many gold medals in the next Olympics?</i> a) It's in the year 2020. b) They'll be in Tokyo. c) Yes, I will. d) To tell the truth, I don't think so.
15	<i>Read to students: Do you ever exercise?</i> a) I've never seen it. b) Yeah, I go to a gym 4 times a week. c) Yes, I have. d) Exercise is good for you.
16	<i>Read to students: When you were a kid, what did you want to be when you grew up?</i> a) A teacher. b) Yes, I did. c) I grew up in Sapporo. d) I don't have any kids.
17	<i>Read to students: Do you want to be self-employed or work for a company?</i> a) Yes, I would. b) No, I don't. c) I want to be my own boss. d) It's a good company.
18	<i>Read to students: What profession are you most interested in?</i>

	a) I like engineering. b) I'm interested in English. c) I'm not interested in it. d) Yes, I am.
19	<i>Read to students: Do you eat breakfast every day?</i> a) Yes, I do. b) I had breakfast this morning. c) I had eggs for breakfast. d) I have breakfast at 7:00.
20	<i>Read to students: How can I become better at speaking Japanese?</i> a) You speak Japanese well. b) By practicing every day. c) Yes, you can. d) I don't speak Japanese.
21	<i>Read to students: Why do you want to learn English?</i> a) I learn English at school. b) Yes, I do. c) I'll need it for work. d) I study English three times a week.
22	<i>Read to students: Have you ever studied a foreign language besides English?</i> a) I don't speak English well. b) Yes, I study English. c) No, but I want to study German. d) Yes, I do.

Appendix B. Samples of experimental-group in-class worksheets.

kind	strict	funny	cheerful	shy	smart
 <p>Q) What's she like? A) She's funny.</p>	 <p>Q) A)</p>	 <p>Q) A)</p>			
 <p>Q) A)</p>	 <p>Q) A)</p>	 <p>Q) A)</p>			

Write “How often” questions.

Then ask your group members and write their answers:

<p>tennis</p> <p>How often do you play tennis?</p> <p>_____?</p>	<p>Group members' answers: Name: Answer: Name: Answer: Name: Answer:</p>
<p>TV</p> <p>_____?</p>	<p>Group members' answers: Name: Answer: Name: Answer: Name: Answer:</p>
<p>karaoke</p> <p>_____?</p>	<p>Group members' answers: Name: Answer: Name: Answer: Name: Answer:</p>
<p>shopping</p> <p>_____?</p>	<p>Group members' answers: Name: Answer: Name: Answer: Name: Answer:</p>
<p>English</p> <p>_____?</p>	<p>Group members' answers: Name: Answer: Name: Answer: Name: Answer:</p>
<p>exercise?</p> <p>_____?</p>	<p>Group members' answers: Name: Answer: Name: Answer:</p>

Name:

Answer:

Appendix C. Post-test listening test, answer sheet and question.

1	<i>Read to students: What is Julia like?</i> a) Yes, she is. b) She likes skiing and shopping. c) Yes, she does. d) She's smart and funny.
2	<i>Read to students: What profession are you most interested in?</i> a) I like engineering. b) I'm interested in English. c) I'm not interested in it. d) Yes, I am.
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