

Using Songs in Enhancing the Teaching of Grammar

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Abstract

This paper shares research and studies done in using songs to teach grammar from the theoretical and practical perspectives. The theoretical part focuses on the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982) and the practical part focuses on techniques in using songs in classrooms.

Introduction

The teaching of grammar has always been an important concern in the teaching of English as a Foreign and Second language generally (Mukundan & Roslim, 2009). Using songs in the teaching of grammar in language classrooms is said to have many advantages. For instance, they entertain and relax the learners while they are learning or practicing a structure, they often eliminate the students' negative attitude towards learning and through providing authenticity and context they make the grammar points more understandable and easy (Saricoban & Metin, 2001).

Theoretical perspectives

Theoretically, the Affective Filter Hypothesis proposed by Krashen (1982) has been the most referred to when it comes to using songs in language teaching and learning. This hypothesis explains that for optimal learning to occur the affective filter must be weak. A weak affective filter means that a positive attitude towards learning is present. If the affective filter is strong the learner will not seek language input, and in turn, not be open for language acquisition (Schoepp, 2001). Similarly, Shen (2009) shares the same view of the Affective Filter Hypothesis with regard to using songs. Using English songs in EFL classrooms can

successfully bring about affective learning through providing a harmonious classroom atmosphere, reducing students' anxiety, fostering their interests and motivating them to learn the target language. Students will regard English songs as part of entertainment rather than work and thus find learning English through songs amusing and relaxing.

Practical perspectives

Practically, using songs benefits teachers and learners in all phases of teaching and learning grammar. However, it is essential to consider the age, interests of the learners and the language being used in the song while selecting a song (Saricoban & Metin, 2000). For example, approaches taken in using songs among children would be different from those used for teenagers and adults (Harmer, 2004). Since most children enjoy singing fun lyrics, using easy children songs will be useful. Furthermore, choosing lively action songs through which they can dance or act while singing will ensure a lively atmosphere. For teenagers or adults in the intermediate or advanced level, it is better to use more meaningful or popular songs (Saricoban & Metin, 2000).

The internet access to music, lyrics and activities has made it easier for teachers to effectively use songs in the classroom (Schoepp, 2001). For instance, they are available on <http://www.lyrics.com> and <http://www.songlyrics.com> as in Ahola (2005). However, it should be kept in mind that songs which provide frequent repetitions, or tell a story, or provide comments about life, or introduce cultural themes, are the effective ones, since they provide authentic and meaningful material (Saricoban & Metin, 2000).

There are several techniques that can be used with songs in the classroom and it mainly depends on the creativity of the teacher. A teacher's selection of a technique or a set of techniques should be based on his or her objectives for the classroom.

Saricoban & Metin (2000) propose some techniques as follows:

- Gap fills or close texts
- Focus questions
- True-false statements
- Put these lines into the correct sequence
- Dictation
- Add a final verse
- Circle the antonyms/synonyms of the given words
- Discuss

Upendran (2001) proposes the following in the teaching of phrasal verbs using the song “Another Day in Paradise” by Phil Collins:

- Students are provided with incomplete lyrics.
- Students are asked students to fill in the blanks.
- Students are asked to volunteer information.
- Students are asked the meaning of phrasal verbs.
- Students are provided with contextual clues.
- Students are asked to study the lyrics again.

Through this activity, Upendran (2001) concludes using songs provides an ideal context for students to learn new phrasal verbs. The enthusiasm generated by songs will enable the teacher to discuss those phrasal verbs, which have been brought up by the students, and not those randomly selected by the teacher or the textbook writer. Making students learn the songs will ensure that they will remember not only what each phrasal verb means but also how it should be used.

Conclusion

It is hoped that this paper which mainly compiles issues in using songs to teach grammar from the theoretical and practical perspectives will provide some insights for teachers to make the learning of English a little different than the usual classroom activities.

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Grammar Knowledge and Its Relationship to Decode Unstressed Elements by Korean Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how Korean speakers of English accomplish perceiving and interpreting the incoming stream of speech. Korean learners of English often mishear unstressed elements, especially function words (cf. content words). It was hypothesized that learners' listening proficiency of unstressed elements and grammar knowledge would correlate. The study investigated ninety-eight Korean college students' grammar knowledge and their listening ability of function words, categorized by Celce-Murcia. The present study revealed that Korean learners' listening proficiency of unstressed elements and grammar knowledge depth have a positive relationship. The better grammar knowledge a learner possesses the higher dictation score and cloze listening score the learner achieved. The study confirmed the positive effect of students' internalized grammar knowledge on listening skills. Results of the study provide empirical descriptions of an important process of listening comprehension; that is, interpreting unstressed elements

Introduction

When listening to spoken English, what would learners need to make sense of it? Rost (2002) maintained that listening skill shares 'traits' with other language skills, 'comprehension' and 'inference.' He argued that testing 'listening only' is not easy because listening shares underlying factors with other language skills that involve 'vocabulary knowledge' and 'grammar knowledge.' With incomplete knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary, these obstacles can distort L2 learners' perception when they listen to English (Broselow, Hurtig & Ringen, 1987). Peterson (1988) argued that accuracy in discriminating grammatical features is very important for intermediate level learners. If learners cannot hear certain unstressed endings, articles, inflections, and function words, they are less likely to incorporate them into their grammatical competence. Garnes and Bonds (1980) claimed that good listeners attend to stress and intonation, attend to stressed vowels, segment the incoming

stream of speech and find words with the stressed vowels and adjacent consonants, and seek a phrase with grammar and meaning. According to Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2004), non-native speakers tend to reveal difficulties in their ability to hear unstressed elements, segment speech, and process thought groups. They also argued that L2 learners are more likely to miss prepositions, articles, and morphological endings, that is, unstressed syllables and words often. They suggested that L2 learners need several important processes to decode native speaker speech (p.223):

1. discerning intonation units,
2. recognizing stressed elements,
3. interpreting unstressed elements and
4. determining the full forms underlying reduced speech.

Korean learners of English tend to experience difficulty in comprehending native speaker speech. In the stream of rapid speech, Korean learners often mishear unstressed elements, especially function words (cf. content words), leading to misinterpretation or distortion of what they have just heard. This problem leads to the failure of learner's uptake of English language. This evidence seems to support Celce-Murcia's suggestion of those processes L2 learners need when they decode native speaker speech. Interpreting unstressed elements, such as function words in particular is thought to have a close relationship with L2 learners' internalized grammar knowledge because function words usually signify grammatical relationships in a sentence or utterance. Most function words are usually unstressed, unless they are in final position or when used emphatically (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2004). There have been several studies investigating the relationship between grammar knowledge and other language skills, but its relationship with listening comprehension of unstressed elements, function words, in particular, has not been found. My research is based on this.

Review of literature

Unstressed elements/function words

Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2004) categorized content words and function words as follows (Refer to Table 1.) Content words are known to carry information while function words show grammatical relationships, and are usually unstressed.

In the study of students' listening comprehension skills through assessment of 'dictation' (for

Native Speakers) and ‘transcription of authentic NS’s speech’ (for Advanced Non Native Speakers), Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin’s (2004) sample findings revealed that both native speakers and non native speakers experienced difficulties in interpreting unstressed elements. Native speakers had difficulties in hearing unstressed elements, segment speech, and process thought groups. They missed prepositions, articles, and morphological endings. On the other hand, NNS revealed difficulties in the areas of segmentation/word boundaries, morphological endings, unstressed words (e.g. *has* for *is*, *at* for *that*, and *a* for *the*), and consonant clusters. It is quite surprising that even native speakers experience the same difficulties in hearing unstressed elements as most non native speakers usually do.

Table1: Content words/function words

Content/information words	Function words
(often stressed)	(usually unstressed, unless in final position or when used emphatically)
nouns, main verbs, adjectives, possessive pronouns, interrogative, <i>not</i> /negative contractions, adverbs, adverbial particles, demonstrative pronouns	articles, auxiliary verbs, possessive adjectives, demonstrative adjectives, personal pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions

Morris (2001), in her findings from the study of investigating the relationship between ‘spelling errors of young ESL learners and grammatical knowledge’ using ‘short written text in response to a picture prompt’ argued that unstressed grammatical (function) words were more difficult for the learners than lexical words, even after students’ 500 hours of exposure to English in the classroom. She maintained that there were a positive correlation between correct spelling of unstressed grammatical words and the increased use of verbal morphology (-s, -ed) and expressed the position in favoring of systematic focus-on-form. In another study of Morris (2002) investigating ‘the impact of attending to unstressed words on the acquisition of written grammatical morphology by French-Speaking ESL students’ she conducted the sustained focus-on-form experiment over a 15-week period. She concluded that the study provided compelling evidence that calling learners’ attention to words that they would not otherwise attend to heightens awareness of grammatical morphemes, while giving implication that far-reaching grammatical morphology is very difficult to teach.

As we observed from the previous studies, despite those difficulties L2 learners have suffered from unstressed elements in interpreting native speaker speech, related researches in this area have not been found. The present study explores how Korean learners of English accomplish perceiving and interpreting the incoming stream of speech. When they listen to spoken

English, Korean learners of English often mishear unstressed elements. For their successful completion of decoding native speaker speech, learners may need their internalized knowledge of English grammar. This study will look into the unstressed elements in incoming stream of speech that Korean learners of English tend to mishear and identify the relationship between the listening comprehension and their grammar knowledge. In order to test this, this study examines ninety-eight Korean college students' grammar knowledge and their listening ability of function words, categorized by Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (2004). Cloze dictation and traditional dictation test were used to assess students' listening ability to manage the processes in comprehending unstressed components.

The research questions are summed up as follows:

1. Do learners' listening proficiency of unstressed elements and grammar knowledge correlate?
2. Does grammar knowledge correlate with dictation score?
3. Does grammar knowledge correlate with cloze test score?
4. Do dictation score and cloze test score correlate?

Methods and procedure

Subjects

The subjects for this study were 98 Korean college students, selected randomly, who are undergoing English instruction. The subjects were selected from two universities, Seogang and Sungkyunkwan, 44 students, 54 students respectively. 44 first-year Seogang University students were taking English Speaking instruction, taught by a Korean bilingual instructor. According to their performance in the placement test, their English proficiency was in the upper-intermediate level, being in level 4 out of 6 levels. Out of 54 subjects from Sungkyunkwan University, 12 students were all English majors while 32 students were mixed. Their general proficiency level was not known and was not taken into account for this study. The participant's experience of staying abroad was not taken into account. Gender difference was ignored.

Instruments

1. Grammar test (35 total with 7 sub-categorized function words, 5 items each)
2. Listening - cloze dictation (35 total with 7 sub-categorized function words, 5 items each)

3. Listening dictation (35 total with 7 sub-categorized function words, 5 items each)
4. Audio material : excerpted, edited and recorded from BBC learning English

The test of grammar knowledge depth used in the present study was designed based on the Study Guide in Grammar in Use, Intermediate (Murphy, 2000). The test was comprised of thirty-five items of seven sub-categorized function words with five items each (i.e., articles, prepositions, personal pronouns, conjunctions, demonstrative adjectives, auxiliary verbs, -s,-ed endings). Out of seven sub-categorized function words, six items were adopted from Celce Murcia's descriptions, and *-s, -ed ending* were added. The test of listening comprehension is comprises two parts: a traditional dictation and a cloze listening. The script of listening comprehension test was excerpted from the BBC learning English and edited for the testing purpose by the researcher. It includes three unrelated passages. In this listening cloze, deletions were governed by the objective of the test, that is, seven sub-categorized function words with five items each (i.e., articles, prepositions, personal pronouns, conjunctions, demonstrative adjectives, auxiliary verbs, -s,-ed endings), not by mathematical deletion of every *n*th word, being thirty-five deletions in total. In scoring, only actual words spoken were accepted as correct responses. In the listening dictation test, participants were to hear twelve questions and take dictation. The test had thirty-five target items of seven sub-categorized function words with five items each (i.e., articles, prepositions, personal pronouns, conjunctions, demonstrative adjectives, auxiliary verbs, -s,-ed endings). In scoring, only actual words spoken were accepted as correct responses. The audio materials used for the listening comprehension tests were all excerpted, edited and recorded from the BBC learning English.

Data collection

The participants were presented with the tests during normal class sessions. An explanation and the instructions were provided in both English and Korean languages. For the test of grammar knowledge depth, the participants were allocated fifteen minutes to complete the test. For cloze listening, the participants were required to fill in the blanks while listening to three passages using Window Media Player 11 for three times at normal speed. The participants were allocated ten minutes to complete the test. For the traditional dictation, the participants were required to write down what they had heard while listening to twelve items using Window Media Player 11. Due to the difficulty of the dictation items, they were

repeated four times at normal speed. The participants were allowed twenty-five minutes to complete the test. Subjects submitted their whole test material after the test.

Data analysis

To analyze subjects' scores on grammar knowledge, listening dictation and listening cloze and to investigate the correlation between grammar knowledge and listening comprehension of function words, SPSS Version.17 was used to obtain descriptive statistics and correlation

Results and discussion

As shown in Table 2, the mean score of Grammar total is higher than the other two variables being 27.66 out of 35, than Dictation Total and Cloze Total, 14.61 and 22.09 respectively. The mean score of Dictation Total is 14.61 out of 35, being the lowest out of three variables. This indicates that the dictation test is a bit more difficult compared to the other tests, ie. grammar knowledge and cloze listening. Standard Deviations of Dictation Total and Cloze Total are relatively high compared to Grammar Total. This indicates that the score of each variable is varied and it also means that students' productions are a bit more varied.

Table 2: Descriptive statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Grammar Total	27.66	3.165	98
Dictation Total	14.61	6.063	98
Cloze Total	22.09	5.613	98

As shown in Table 3, correlation between grammar total and dictation total is significant, being .484, while correlation between grammar total and cloze total is also significant, being .587. This shows that the relationship between grammar knowledge and cloze is stronger than the relationship between grammar and dictation. Correlation between cloze total and dictation total is significant, being .758. It indicates that the relationship between dictation and cloze is very strong. In other words, students whose dictation scores are good also produce good scores in cloze.

Table 3: Correlations by total score

	Grammar Total	Dictation Total	Cloze Total
Grammar Total	1		
Dictation Total	.484**	1	
Cloze Total	.587**	.758**	1

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 4, correlation between grammar article and dictation article is significant, being .253. This shows two variables have a weak relationship. Correlation between grammar auxiliary and dictation auxiliary is also significant, being .274. It means two variables have a weak relationship. Correlation between grammar personal pronoun and dictation personal pronoun is significant, being .296. It means two variables have a weak relationship.

Table 4: Correlation between grammar and dictation (by individual scores)

	GR PREP	GRART	GR CONJ	GR DEM ADJ	GRAUX	GR P.PRON	GR S/ED
D PREP			.219*	.235*	.209*		
D ART		<u>.253*</u>				.334*	
D CONJ				.214*	.239*	.202*	
D DMADJ			.199*				
D AUX			.284**		<u>.274**</u>		.275*
D P.PRON		.328*	.253*		.199*	<u>.296**</u>	
D S/ED	.254*	.208*	.222*	.276**	.254*	<u>.292**</u>	

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As shown in Table 5, correlation between grammar demonstrative adjective and cloze demonstrative adjective is significant, being .228. This shows two variables have a weak relationship. Correlation between grammar personal pronoun and cloze personal pronoun is significant, being .250. This shows two variables have a weak relationship.

Table 5: Correlation between grammar and cloze (by individual scores)

	GR PREP GRART	GR CONJ	GR DEM ADJ	GR AUX	GR P.PRON	GR S/ED
CL PREP CL ART		.216*	.259*			.219*
CLCONJ	.235*		.224*	.217*	.276*	
CL DMADJ	.221*		<u>.228*</u>	.280**	.210*	.359**
CL AUX	.220*	.324*				.219*
CL P.PRON	.343**	.243*	.318**		<u>.250*</u>	
CL S/ED	.320**	.280**	.334**	.206*	.324**	

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Conclusion

The present study revealed that Korean learners' listening proficiency of unstressed elements, function words in particular, and grammar knowledge depth have a positive relationship. The better grammar knowledge a learner possesses the higher dictation score and cloze listening score the learner achieved. The finding also indicated that dictation score and cloze test score have a very strong relationship. In other words, students whose cloze scores are good also

produce good scores in dictation. In sum, Korean learners of English, college students in particular, need their internalized knowledge of English grammar for their successful completion of interpreting unstressed elements in the stream of native speaker speech. The study confirmed the positive effect of students' internalized grammar knowledge on listening skills. Results of the study provide empirical descriptions of an important process of listening comprehension; that is, interpreting unstressed elements. The study also proposes that systematic grammar instructions may benefit adult SLA. Further study is needed to investigate the relationship between grammar knowledge and other language skills.

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