The Effects of Explicit Instruction on Intransitive Verb Structure in L2 English Classrooms

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Abstract

The present study attempts to demonstrate that explicit instruction, more precisely, proactive deductive explicit instruction, can be effective for Japanese university learners of English (university JLEs) to notice and comprehend the features of the particular items as in the distinction between transitive-intransitive verb structures. There are two reasons for this assumption. One is that in the first place most JLEs do not clearly know the rules of transitive and intransitive verbs. The other is that analytic ability and English proficiency of university JLEs are sufficient to understand instructor’s grammar explanations of the rules. It has been found that JLEs often produce and accept ungrammatical sentences such as *The magician disappeared the rabbit. The researchers gave explicit instruction on the transitive and intransitive verb distinction to 45 university JLEs, focusing on their structures and meanings three times over a period of three weeks (once a week) for about 25 minutes each time. The participants completed a 40-item grammaticality judgment task before, immediately after, and 5 weeks after the series of instructions. The results showed that our assumption was valid for some participants but had little effect for others. These results are discussed in detail.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the study is to demonstrate that explicit instruction, or more precisely proactive deductive explicit instruction, should be useful for Japanese learners of English (JLEs) to notice and comprehend the linguistic rules distinguishing intransitive verbs from transitive verbs. The researchers speculate that explicit instruction can be useful for those grammatical items of which second language (L2) learners do not have clear knowledge, and for those who have good analytic abilities to understand instructor’s grammar explanations.

It has been observed that JLEs often produce errors such as (1a-d) below (Ju, 2000; Montrul, 2000; Oshita, 1997). Since the verbs used in these examples (happen, disappear, fall and appear) are all intransitive verbs, they do not take an object. Hence, they cannot be used in the DP
(Determiner Phrase)-V (Verb)-DP structure. Intransitive verbs are used in the DP-V structure, and the correct usages of these verbs are shown in (2a-d).

(1) a. *John happened the accident. (*DP-V-DP)
   b. *The magician disappeared the pigeon in the box. (*DP-V-DP)
   c. *John fell Mary from the second floor. (*DP-V-DP)
   d. *Jane appeared her article in one of the international journals. (*DP-V-DP)

(2) a. The accident happened. (DP-V)
   b. The pigeon in the box disappeared. (DP-V)
   c. Mary fell from the second floor. (DP-V)
   d. Jane’s article appeared in one of the international journals. (DP-V)

Another way to express the meanings intended in (1a-d) without changing the subject is to use different verbs as in (3a, c and d), or to use the periphrastic causative construction as in (3b).

(3) a. John caused the accident.
   b. The magician made the pigeon in the box disappear.
   c. John pushed Mary off the second floor.
   d. Jane was able to publish her article in one of the international journals.

Why do JLEs produce these errors? It seems that they cannot distinguish between the usage of intransitive verbs from that of transitive verbs. We assume that there are two possible causes for this confusion: (i) even though they know the rule, they still make the errors; and (ii) since they do not know the rule, they make the errors. Before we implemented the present research, we conducted a simple questionnaire with the university JLEs in the experiment in order to know their knowledge of transitive and intransitive distinctions. From the questionnaire, we obtained the information that most of the JLEs do not know the grammar rules concerning the contrast between transitive and intransitive verbs. What is more, many of them did not know or were not even aware of transitive-intransitive distinction in their mother tongue, Japanese. Then, we led to the conclusion that explicit grammar instruction on the rules of English transitive and intransitive verbs could be effective on JLEs by demonstrating examples from Japanese and English.

This paper is organized as follows. After the Introduction, the classifications of English and Japanese verbs are explained in Section 2. Then, Section 3 reviews the effect of instructions. In Section 4, we demonstrate the body of the present experiment. Results are shown in Section 5, and Discussion and Conclusion follow.
2. Classification of English and Japanese verbs

English verbs can be classified into three types in accordance with their transitivity and intransitivity distinctions shown in (4). They are (i) verbs functioning mainly as a transitive verb, (ii) verbs functioning mainly as an intransitive verb, and (iii) verbs used as both a transitive and an intransitive verb (Kageyama, 1996).

(4) Classification of English verbs

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Verbs} & \quad \text{Transitive: } \text{accept, build, destroy, hire, etc.} \\
& \quad \downarrow \quad \text{Unaccusative: } \text{appear, arrive, disappear, happen, etc.} \\
& \quad \text{Intransitive} \quad \text{Unergative: } \text{cough, laugh, run, swim, etc.} \\
& \quad \downarrow \quad \text{Both transitive & intransitive: } \text{break, close, freeze, open, etc.}
\end{align*}
\]

The typical examples of transitive verbs are accept, build, destroy, hire, etc. They always require an object; they are used in the DP-V-DP structure as in (5a-b), but they cannot be used in the DP-V structure as in (5c-d).

(5) Structures with transitive verbs (DP-V-DP, *DP-V)

a. Mary accepted his proposal. (DP-V-DP)
b. The company built a massive factory near the river. (DP-V-DP)
c. *His proposal accepted. (*DP-V)
d. *A massive factory built near the river. (*DP-V)

On the other hand, intransitive verbs are used in the DP-V structure, but not in the DP-V-DP structure. They are further subcategorized into two types: unaccusative verbs as in (6a-b) and unergative verbs as in (6c-d). Typical examples of unaccusative verbs are appear, arrive, disappear, happen, etc., and cough, laugh, run, swim, etc. are those of unergative verbs.

(6) Two types of intransitive verbs: unaccusative and unergative verbs

a. The sun appeared from behind the clouds. (Unaccusative verb)
b. The accident happened. (Unaccusative verb)
c. The baby laughed. (Unergative verb)
d. The students swam for an hour. (Unergative verb)
Although these two subclasses seem to have the same syntactic surface structure (DP-V), in theoretical linguistics it is generally claimed that they have different underlying representations; the sole argument of unaccusative verbs (6a-b) is a Theme or a Patient in the semantic meaning, and originates in the VP (verb phrase) and moves to the surface subject position to receive grammatical Case (subjective Case), whereas the sole argument of unergative verbs (6c-d) is an Agent, and generates in the subject position in the argument structure, which indicates that there is no DP movement (Burzio, 1986; Levin & Rappaport Hovav, 1995; Perlmutter, 1978). From these linguistic structure differences, intransitive verbs should be divided into two categories. The idea that the single argument of intransitive verbs originates in the VP, and moves to the surface subject position in the syntax to receive Case is known as the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978).

Although we will not examine this, there is another class of verbs which can be used as both the DP-V-DP (transitive usage) as in (7a), and DP-V structures (intransitive usage) as in (7b) in the same lexical form. Verbs such as break, close, freeze, open, etc. are typical examples of this verb class.

(7) An example of verbs with both intransitive and transitive usages
   a. The boy broke the glass. (Transitive)
   b. The glass broke. (Intransitive)

Based on this linguistic background, we will examine the effectiveness of explicit instruction on JLEs’ erroneous comprehension related to unaccusative verb errors. Let us look at sentences in (8) (see also (1)). As we have seen, since verbs such as appear and happen are unaccusative verbs, they cannot be used in the DP-V-DP structure. However, as mentioned earlier, it is known that many L2 learners including JLEs often produce these erroneous sentences. The researchers hypothesize in this paper that teacher’s explicit instruction can promote JLEs’ comprehension of these kinds of erroneous sentences and reduce the rate of misjudgment.

(8) Overgeneralization of an unaccusative verb as a transitive verb
   a. *The strong wind appeared the sun from behind the clouds. (*DP-V-DP)
   b. *The drunken driver happened the accident. (*DP-V-DP)

3. Effects of explicit instructions

Explicit instruction itself is not a new teaching method as Ellis (2010) claims that all language teachers have experience using explicit instruction at some time or another and in some form or another. Also it can be said that every teaching method, from Grammar translation to the current communication-oriented methods, has explicit instruction techniques in them. Ellis (2008,
2010) divided teaching methodologies of explicit instruction into four types by referring to two dimensions of explicit instruction: (i) deductive/inductive dimension and (ii) proactive/reactive dimension (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of explicit instruction</th>
<th>Deductive</th>
<th>Inductive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>Metalinguistic explanation</td>
<td>Consciousness-raising tasks; Production-based and comprehension-based practice exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reactive</td>
<td>Explicit correction; Metalinguistic feedback</td>
<td>Repetition; Corrective recasts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Adapted from Ellis, 2010, p. 6)

Based on the criterion shown in Table 1, since the treatment we adopted in this experiment uses metalinguistic explanations, it can be called “proactive deductive explicit instruction.” The metalinguistic explanations are provided orally by the teacher or in written form in a textbook or a reference grammar book (Ellis, 2010). The teacher normally will focus on a specific linguistic item by showing and explaining specific features of example sentences. These are what the present research adopted.

Does teacher’s explicit instruction promote learner’s L2 proficiency? Some researchers insist that instruction does not help, or is even harmful as it detracts from time spent for other pedagogical exercises (e.g., Truscott, 1996, 2007), but many others claim it is effective (e.g., Andringa, de Glopper & Hacquebord, 2011; Ferris, 2004; Robinson, 1996). Why did the researchers in this experiment decide to adopt proactive deductive explicit instruction to university JLEs in spite of the fact that these L2 learners had already received plenty of instruction on English grammar when they were in junior and senior high schools? This is because the researchers believe that, generally speaking, explicit instruction, or maybe implicit instruction too, is effective for university JLEs.

As far as the rules on intransitive verbs (i.e., unaccusative verbs) are concerned, the researchers assume that some high school teachers may teach the rules, but many others may not. One reason is that the rules on unaccusative usages are not considered important and are not paid much attention to compared with those grammar items as to-infinitives, present perfective and relative clauses. There is a possibility that JLEs do not know or learn the rules concerning usages of unaccusative verbs. Thus, it leads to the conclusion that once they are taught the rules, they can notice and promote their understanding of the rules. Therefore, the researchers have concluded that the significance of explicit grammar instruction to university JLEs are the followings;
(9) Explicit grammar instruction can make JLEs:
   a. reconfirm and clarify the grammar rules they are not sure of and raise consciousness; and
   b. notice and comprehend grammar rules which they have not studied yet, or have forgotten.

   However, it is also important to note that we should remember that it is not always the case that even when the teachers teach a grammar rule to their students, they can quickly acquire or raise their accuracy of that particular grammar rules. It is claimed that, for L2 learners, what they are taught does not always lead to acquisition (Shirahata, Wakabayashi & Murano, 2010). Instruction could be effective for some grammatical items, but not for others (Shibata, Shirahata & Taferner, 2013; Shirahata, 2008; Shirahata, Shibata & Taferner, 2013a & b). Shirahata (2008), for example, hypothesizes that teacher’s instruction and also corrective feedback do not work well for those items which convey only grammatical features such as grammatical morphemes: third person singular -s, plural markers for nouns, etc., while usages of lexicon and items which include conveying semantic meanings, e.g., usages of conjunctions and the selection of sentential subjects could be effective.

   If this hypothesis is valid, explicit instruction toward erroneous usages of unaccusative verbs could be effective because the usages are relevant to semantic roles of the verbs. This is one of the reasons the researchers believe that the proactive deductive explicit instruction must be effective for university JLEs, at least, effective to notice and comprehend what unaccusative verbs are. The researchers also would like to claim that there are some other advantages of explicit instruction for university JLEs studying English in the classroom settings. They are shown in (10).

(10) Advantages of explicit instructions for university JLEs
   a. Teachers can teach many learners at one time and give the same instruction to them.
   b. Teachers can explain grammar rules which do not frequently appear in daily conversation, free writing, spoken data or other production data.
   c. Since university students have high cognitive analytic ability compared with children, they can understand teacher’s instruction without much difficulty.

   Now, let us look at Figure 1. It shows a model of L2 acquisition process the researchers made (Kondo & Shirahata, 2015). We assume that at least explicit grammar instruction on a particular grammatical form could enhance “noticing” and “comprehension” of the item. Noticing and comprehension may be considered the first step of L2 acquisition. The researchers believe that if L2 learners do not notice and comprehend the grammar item, they cannot further their grammatical knowledge. Thus, it is important to have L2 learners notice and comprehend L2 grammar.
4. Experiment

4.1 Research assumption

As has already mentioned, our assumption is that proactive deductive explicit instruction (i.e., metalinguistic explanation) should be effective and JLEs can improve their degree of comprehension of intransitive verb structures. It is based on the following logic based on the fact that many Japanese university students make errors with intransitive verbs because they do not know the applicable grammar rule, i.e., these English verbs can be categorized into three types: transitive verbs, intransitive verbs, and verbs that allow transitivity alternations. Understanding grammar rules of transitive and intransitive verb distinctions should not be difficult for university JLEs because their general cognitive ability is sufficient enough to understand the rules. Once they are taught and notice the rules, their error rate will decrease. Then, it is speculated that those university JLEs who do not get a high score are the ones who do not have good analytic ability and/or enough English proficiency to understand the instructor’s grammar explanations, or the ones who do not carefully listen to the instructor’s explanations (Shibata & Shirahata, 2013).

4.2 Participants

The participants in the present study were 45 JLEs from two different universities in Japan. They were all undergraduate students, and their general English proficiency levels varied from elementary to intermediate according to the Oxford Quick Placement Test (2001) (mean scores: 32.6 out of 60) and TOEIC scores (mean scores: 380 out of 990). Since the pretest results from the students of these two different universities showed no significant difference, the researchers decided not to divide the results but combined them together. There was a control group of 28 JLEs from another university in Japan whose English proficiency levels were also between elementary and intermediate.

4.3 Materials and Procedures

First of all, the researchers gave all the participants in both the experimental and control groups a pre-test (grammaticality judgment task (GJT)). Then from the following week, explicit instructions were provided to the participants of the experimental group three times over a period of three weeks for approximately 25 minutes each time. The researchers explained the participants in the experimental group which verbs were used transitively, intransitively, or both transitively.
and intransitively, using many example sentences such as (11) to (13). For further information about how the researchers gave instructions to the university JLEs, see Kondo and Shirahata (2015).

(11) Transitive verb
   a. The publisher accepted my manuscript. (DP-V-DP)
   b. *My manuscript accepted. (*DP-V)
(12) Intransitive verb
   a. The accident happened. (DP-V)
   b. *Mary happened the accident. (*DP-V-DP)
(13) Alternating verb
   a. Tom broke my camera. (DP-V-DP)
   b. My camera broke. (DP-V)

For instance, the researchers explained that since a transitive verb, like accept, always takes an object, (11a) is grammatical, but (11b) is ungrammatical. By contrast, since happen is an intransitive verb, it can be used only in the DP-V structure as in (12a). When it is used in the DP-V-DP structure as in (12b), the sentence becomes ungrammatical since an intransitive verb does not take an object. (13) is one of examples the researchers used when explaining verbs which are used both intransitively and transitively.

There are two points the researchers emphasized in their instructions. The first point was case particles in Japanese when English verbs are translated into Japanese. For instance, we explained the participants that happen means -ga (nominative case) okoru “happen”, instead of just giving the translation, okoru deleting -ga. Also the researchers told that kick means -o (accusative case) keru “kick”, and break means -ga kowareru as well as -o kowasu. Thus, by using these case particles, the researchers emphasized the contrasts between intransitive and transitive verb structures. The second point the researchers emphasized was the fact that in English, sentential subjects of intransitive verbs can be inanimate. For example, in the sentence The accident happened, the subject of the sentence is the accident, which is an inanimate noun. As is often the case with JLEs, they tend to think that since the accident is not a living thing, it cannot cause any action, so it cannot become a subject. The researchers tried to clear up this misunderstanding.

In this study, although the focus was on each learner’s understanding of intransitive verbs, in particular, unaccusative verbs, the researchers taught the transitive verbs and the alternating verbs as well as the intransitive verbs to the participants in order for them to systematically get the whole picture of English verb structures. The researchers spent almost the same amount of time on the explanation of each verb type. All the instructions were given in Japanese to make sure that the participants understand their explanations appropriately.
The participants in the experimental group completed a 40-item GJT before (pre-test), immediately after (post-test 1), and five weeks after the series of instructions (post-test 2) in order to examine whether explicit instructions provided were effective on these JLEs. By contrast, the control group took the GJT just twice (pre-test and post-test 2) and did not receive any explicit instructions during the experimental period. The researchers tested 5 different intransitive verbs as the test items, and 5 different transitive verbs as the distractors shown in (14).

(14) Verbs tested in the experiment
   a. Intransitive verbs: appear, arrive, disappear, fall, happen
   b. Transitive verbs: accept, destroy, hire, invite, respect

Each verb was incorporated into the DP-V and the DP-V-DP structures, and each test item consisted of a context sentence in Japanese and a target sentence in English. The participants were asked to judge if the underlined part of the target sentence was grammatically correct or not, by choosing an answer from the three choices, “grammatical,” “ungrammatical” or “not sure.” Examples of the test items are given in (15) and (16).

(15) Grammatically correct test item
   Context sentence: The leaves turned red, but they were exposed to a strong wind last night and it has spoiled the leaves (written in Japanese).
   Test sentence: All the leaves fell from the trees.

(16) Grammatically incorrect test item
   Context sentence: Tom and Mary were going to try bungee jumping but Tom was too scared to jump so Mary pushed him from behind (written in Japanese).
   Test sentence: *Mary fell Tom from the cliff.

Intransitive verbs were correct in the DP-V structure as in (15) and incorrect in the DP-V-DP structure as in (16). By contrast, transitive verbs were correct in the DP-V-DP structure and incorrect in the DP-V structure. The patterns of grammaticality with two verb types, i.e., intransitive and transitive verbs, in two verb structures, i.e., the DP-V and the DP-V-DP structures, is summarized in Table 2. In this study, however, the researchers focus on the JLEs’ responses for the intransitive verbs (i.e., unaccusative verbs) in the DP-V and the DP-V-DP structures.

Table 2. The patterns of grammaticality in four categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Intransitive verbs</th>
<th>Transitive verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DP-V structure</td>
<td>Grammatical</td>
<td>Ungrammatical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DP-V-DP structure</td>
<td>Ungrammatical</td>
<td>Grammatical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The context and test sentences in the three tests are slightly changed with the alteration of nouns and adverbs while maintaining the degree of difficulty for each item. There are four tokens (2 grammatical sentences and 2 ungrammatical sentences) for each verb, and there are ten verbs used in the test. Thus, there are in total 40 test items in one test. These test items are arranged so that the same verb does not appear on the same page. There is no time restriction for the participants to complete the test. They are, however, not allowed to go back to the previous items to encourage them to draw on their intuitions.

4.4 Data analyses

In this paper, we will first report the overall group results and then the number of participants who correctly answered the verb usages of the grammatical DP-V structure and the ungrammatical DP-V-DP structure of intransitive verbs in each test (pre-test, post-test 1 and post-test 2). Our criterion for understanding the verb usage is correctly answering 8 or more out of 10 items (over 80% correctness). When participants get a score under 7, they are regarded as failing the criteria.

The criteria for the two structures, the DP-V and the DP-V-DP, are different; as for the DP-V structure for intransitive verbs, since this is a grammatically correct structure, answering correctly means that the participant accepts the structure. On the other hand, as for the DP-V-DP structure, since this is an ungrammatical structure for intransitive verbs, answering correctly means that the participant rejects the structure as ungrammatical. Participant’s response of “not sure” is treated as incorrect.

5. Results

The overall group results are summarized in Table 3. The data were submitted to a repeated measures ANOVA and Bonferroni. The results reveal that the mean scores for the DP-V structure in post-test 1 and post-test 2 are significantly higher than that in the pre-test ($p = .017$ and $p = .003$, respectively) for the experimental group. As for the *DP-V-DP structure, the mean scores in post-test 2 are significantly higher than in the pre-test ($p = .007$) and post-test 1 ($p = .002$). As for the control group, by contrast, there are no significant differences between the pre-test and post-test 2 in both structures. Thus, since the mean scores of the experimental group in both the DP-V and the *DP-V-DP structures improved in post-test 2, it can be said that explicit instructions provided in this study can be effective at least for 5 weeks.

From the group results, however, we cannot judge whether all the participants improved their scores in the post-tests; therefore, individual results are further examined. Table 4 shows the number and the percentage of the participants in the experimental group who passed the criterion (over 80% correct answers) in the DP-V and the *DP-V-DP structures with the intransitive verbs.
Table 3. Mean scores of each sentence structure by groups (standard deviations in brackets)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence structures</th>
<th>Experimental group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Experimental group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
<th>Experimental group</th>
<th>Control group</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DP-V</td>
<td>8.67 (1.732)</td>
<td>8.46 (1.170)</td>
<td>9.56 (1.159)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>9.42 (1.097)</td>
<td>8.57 (1.574)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*DP-V-DP</td>
<td>7.49 (2.191)</td>
<td>6.25 (2.319)</td>
<td>7.53 (2.801)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>8.47 (2.074)</td>
<td>6.04 (2.912)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. The number of participants in the experimental group who passed the criterion (n = 45)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence structures</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test 1</th>
<th>Post-test 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DP-V</td>
<td>39 (86.7%)</td>
<td>43 (95.6%)</td>
<td>43 (95.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*DP-V-DP</td>
<td>25 (55.6%)</td>
<td>27 (60.0%)</td>
<td>35 (77.8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The analysis shown in Table 4 focuses on the participants who passed the criterion. In general, the participants answered more correctly when accepting the grammatical DP-V structure than when rejecting the ungrammatical DP-V-DP structure. As can be seen from the table, the number of participants who passed the criterion in the DP-V structure increased from 39 (86.7%) in the pre-test to 43 (95.6%) in post-test 1 and post-test 2. As for the result of the ungrammatical DP-V-DP structure, the number of participants who passed the criterion increased from 25 (55.6%) in the pre-test to 27 (60.0%) in post-test 1, and went up to 35 (77.8%) in post-test 2.

Now let us look at the data from the opposite side of the analysis, i.e., the number of participants who failed the criterion. Table 5 shows the number of participants in the experimental group who did not meet the criterion. As can be seen from the table, the number of participants who failed the criterion for the DP-V structure decreased from 6 in the pre-test to 2 in post-test 1 and also post-test 2. As for the result of the ungrammatical DP-V-DP structure, the number of the participants who failed the criterion decreased from 20 in the pre-test to 18 in post-test 1, and went down to 10 in post-test 2. Thus, the results in Table 5 indicate that some participants increased their comprehension for both structures during the research period.

Table 5. The number of participants in the experimental group who failed the criterion (n = 45)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence structures</th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test 1</th>
<th>Post-test 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DP-V</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*DP-V-DP</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Having mentioned above that some participants improved their comprehension in the post-tests, Table 5 also shows that some participants still did not reach the criterion in the
post-tests, whose scores are shown in Tables 6 and 7. The participants who are not listed in the Tables 6 and 7 are those who met the criterion in both post-tests 1 and 2. That is, they scored over 80% in both tests. Table 6 shows the individual scores of the participants in the experimental group who failed in accepting the DP-V structure over 80% in either post-test. As can be seen from the table, while subject 10 met the criterion in post-test 2, subjects 33 and 45 did not meet the criterion in post-test 2.

Table 6. Individual scores of the participants in the experimental group who failed in accepting the DP-V structure over 80% in post-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test 1</th>
<th>Post-test 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S33</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S45</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Individual scores of the participants in the experimental group who failed in rejecting the DP-V-DP structure over 80% in post-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-test</th>
<th>Post-test 1</th>
<th>Post-test 2</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>S8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>S10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>S20</td>
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<td>6</td>
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<td>S24</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>S29</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>S30</td>
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6. Discussion

The researchers assumed that explicit instructions on intransitive verb structures would be effective for university JLEs. The results from the experimental group and the control group appeared to be in line with the assumption in that while the number of participants in the experimental group who passed the criterion (over 8 correct answers out of 10 test items) increased after the series of instructions, the number of participants in the control group did not change from the first test to the second test with an interval of 8 weeks. An interesting finding was that more participants answered over 80% correctly in post-test 2 than in post-test 1, which means that these participants kept improving their understanding of these verb structures even though the explicit instructions were over. The plausible explanation is that the participants had sufficient time to digest what they newly learned and were able to internalize intransitivity-transitivity verb differences and grammar rules.

In our explicit instructions, we emphasized the grammatical case particles attached with Japanese verbs (e.g., ga: nominative case marker and o: accusative case marker) when translating an English verb into Japanese, and the fact that an inanimate noun can be the subject of intransitive verbs. The results indicate that these instructions can be effective for university JLEs to clarify the differences between transitive and intransitive verbs and to improve their
comprehension of the verb structures. Once they were explicitly taught the features of verb structures, most of them could notice and comprehend the correct structures, and they can continue to maintain the knowledge for five weeks, which might be a long period of time for learning to be effective.

Receiving linguistic input is a necessary condition for L2 learners to acquire grammatical knowledge of a target language. However, mere exposure to L2 input is insufficient for identifying abstract grammatical features through mapping the form, and its meaning and function. The present study claims that explicit instruction is beneficial for L2 learners in order to make their grammar learning more efficient.

However, it is also true that there are some participants who did not reach the criterion of the study (over 80% correctness). The researchers speculate that this is due to participants’ insufficient readiness (insufficient analytic ability) and/or little attention to teacher’s instruction during instruction sessions. Shibata and Shirahata (2013) examined 49 university JLEs. These participants were divided into 3 groups based on their TOEIC scores: low-, middle-, and high-levels. They received three grammar explanation sessions on the sentential subject in English. The consecutive instructions emphasized that unlike Japanese, the sentence-initial DP in English is a subject, not a topic. The instruction effect was measured by comparing their scores on the pre- and post-tests. The results revealed that the low-level JLEs did not fully comprehend the most critical points of the instructions. Their responses showed that they did not remember what they had been taught nor did they know how to apply what they had learned through the sessions. Shibata and Shirahata (2013) concluded that grammar instructions may not work in the same way for all JLEs at the same time. This leads to the pedagogical implication that learners’ readiness should be checked to see whether or not they have accumulated enough underlying linguistic knowledge prior to the application of grammar instruction and input (see also Dekeyser, 1995).

7. Conclusion

The present study attempted to clarify the effects of explicit instructions (in other words, proactive deductive explicit instruction or metalinguistic explanations) on verb structures. The research results showed that about half of the participants who had failed the criterion (over 80% correctness) in the pre-test finally attained the criterion. The major reason could be that they had not known the rules on verb subcategorizations. Teaching grammar items to university JLEs which they have not clearly learned yet, or have forgotten, should be effective as its effect can last at least for five weeks.

On the other hand, about half of the participants still remained to be under the criterion. The participants’ English proficiency levels are not significantly different, judging from their Quick Placement Test and TOEIC scores. Thus, the researchers speculate that it is due to participant’s
analytic ability and/or their attitudes toward instructor’s explanations. However, as this is just speculative now, further research is needed to verify this statement.

Another possibility for future research is that, although we examined to what extent the participants noticed and comprehended the intransitive verb structures after explicit instructions, we did not examine whether or not they gained “automated knowledge” of these syntactic structures. Therefore, in a future study we must investigate the acquisition of transitive and intransitive structural differences.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Dr. Koji Suda and Mr. Robert H. Taferner for their useful comments and suggestions. We also thank three anonymous reviewers for giving us invaluable comments and constructive suggestions.

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