

# Communicative Task and its Effect:

## Focus on Form Activity on the Third Person Singular Agreement at a Cram School in Japan

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### タスクデザインとその効果：

塾でのフォーカスオンフォームを使った三人称単数現在形の指導について

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#### Abstract

This paper examined if students accustomed to non-communicative teaching methods could learn target grammar more easily, enjoy the lesson, and advance communicative skills if taught using communicative teaching methods. Two tasks were designed to teach the third person singular agreement on the verb in English to junior high school students studying at a cram school in Japan. The students' performance on the use of the target grammar form was analyzed initially through recorded oral reports from an interview activity and via the second oral reports from an information gap activity 3 days later. The results of the initial and second error rates in the oral reports suggest that the activities were successful. The students enjoyed the activities while focusing on the form and the class was considered a success. This study is valuable since it challenged traditional way of teaching English at Japanese cram schools and changed the students' consciousness toward English education.

**Key words :** communicative teaching method,  
third person singular agreement on the verb, interview activity,  
information gap activity, error rates

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#### 抄 録

この論文は伝統的な英語指導法に慣れている日本人にコミュニケーション・アプローチで英語教育を行った場合の英語習得について考える。日本の進学塾で学ぶ中学生を対象に、動詞の三人称単数現在形を教えるためのコミュニケーション・タスクを2つ作成し、塾で実際に使用し、誤答率を調査した。1回目はインタビュー、三日後にインフォメーション・ギャップを行い、それぞれのオーラル・レポートを記録し正解率を比較分析した。結果、コミュニケーション・タスクは塾の中学生の英語習得を促すことがわかった。生徒たちは楽しんで英語を学び、英語教育への意識が変わった。また、コミュニケーションな英語指導でも文法の習得が起きるということがわかった。

**キーワード：**コミュニケーションアプローチ、三人称単数現在形、インタビュー、  
インフォメーションギャップ、誤答率

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## Introduction

This paper presents the findings of a small scale attempt to determine if using communicative teaching for Japanese learners of English who are accustomed to traditional non-communicative teaching could preserve the goals of the traditional methods while advancing students enjoyment of the lesson as well as their communicative skills. To consider the effect of communicative approach, I designed two tasks to teach the third person singular agreement on the verb in English (3SG agreement) to Japanese junior high school students studying at a cram school in Japan. These tasks were implemented in an English class at the school, and the results of the class are presented and discussed.

The instruction in English classes at *Shingaku-Juku* (*juku* hereafter) for junior high school students, a cram school focused on high-level high school entrance exams, usually focuses only on the explicit teaching of forms without any opportunities for students to practice meaningful exercise. The goal is to have the students pass the high school entrance exam, not to acquire the language. Thus, this policy treats English not as a language but as one of the subjects that has to be studied in order to pass the exam.

I believe that it is possible to teach a foreign language communicatively in such a way that students still successfully master the target grammar as well as acquire useful language skills. In this study, I explore the effectiveness of combining communicative and grammar teaching and challenge the teaching policy at one of the nation-wide commercial *juku* by conducting semi-communicative activities with the aim of developing students' language skills in addition to their grammar knowledge.

### ***Theoretical Background***

A number of researchers have discussed different approaches to second language teaching and learning (cf., Ellis, 1992; Krashen, 1987; Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Pica, Kanagy & Falodun, 1993; Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Some researchers have specifically focused on grammar teaching, examining how learners can focus on the target grammar without isolating it from communication (e.g., DeKeyser, 1998; Doughty & Williams, 1998; Ellis, 1998; Long, 1996; Spada, 1997). These researches introduced different approaches to applying a focus on form (FonF) to tasks.

DeKeyser (1998) presents a model of sequential teaching for FonF. He suggests that the target form should be explicitly taught first, then controlled practice can be conducted to allow learners to restructure this grammar knowledge into a more usable cognitive format. DeKeyser claims that learners must be given ample time to acquire declarative knowledge and need many example cases to proceduralize the knowledge. Once declarative knowledge has been achieved, the instruction should move to using the target

form in communicative activities. DeKeyser suggests that FonF is especially efficient when teaching “easy-to-learn, but hard-to-acquire-without-instruction” rules.

DeKeyser’s model may be effective in English classes at Japanese schools, where traditional teaching methods and approaches such as grammar translation are still popular. In these schools, both the teachers and the students are familiar with deductive teaching but not communicative activities. These teachers and students might feel more comfortable with communicative activities if the target grammar were first introduced explicitly by the teacher, followed by controlled practice, i.e., written mechanical exercises in a textbook, since the first part of the instruction is the same as their usual class structure. DeKeyser’s model might thus be used to bring communicative activities naturally into these classes.

This model was also suitable for this study since the *juku* had a very strict teaching policy; English teachers were expected to give explicit instruction and not focus on students’ development of language acquisition. Thus, I applied this FonF model to my teaching at a *juku* in an attempt to combine deductive grammar teaching with semi-communicative activities.

## **Methods and Findings**

### ***Participants***

The tasks were designed for students in the English class at the *juku* where I taught in the year 2000. The class consisted of 10 first-year (7<sup>th</sup> grade) junior high school students (5 males and 5 females). The *juku* had 3 levels of English classes for first year junior high school students, and the participants in this study were in the lowest level. Their level was decided based on a nation-wide written exam conducted by all the schools affiliated with this *juku*.

The students had been studying at the *juku* since they were in the sixth grade. They had been taught English grammar exclusively by a Japanese teacher. In addition to the year of English lessons at the *juku*, students had started English classes when they entered junior high school. These English classes also tended to focus only on explicit knowledge of the language with little, if any, meaningful practice. Therefore, students were familiar only with grammar exercises and translation of texts and had not been exposed to any type of communicative activities.

### ***Juku, the Cram School***

The *juku* offers a 2-hour long class per subject twice a week. The goal of the *juku* English class is to have students memorize the target forms and reduce errors in form on the written exams. Thus, the administrators are very strict about having teachers follow the textbook provided by the *juku* and not introducing any activities irrelevant to the entrance

exams.

The students do not consider English a language to use for communication, but simply view it as one of the subjects they have to study to pass the entrance exam for high school to continue their education. This study was part of an attempt to have students realize that they can enjoy learning English while gaining knowledge for the exams. By raising their scores on the monthly exams conducted at the *juku*, I intended to demonstrate to the administrators that the *juku* policy on teaching English could be reconsidered.

### ***Procedures and Analyses***

This study required two class meetings. In the first class, I introduced the target form, 3 SG agreement, to the first year junior high school students in the *juku* English class. The students received explicit instruction on the form followed by written mechanical drills and exercises in the textbook. A semi-communicative pair work task, an interview, was introduced at the end of the class.

The students in pairs interviewed each other about their school day schedule. First, they were told to individually write their typical school day schedule in Japanese in their notebook. They were told that they should come up with activities which they could describe in English since their vocabulary and sentence patterns were very limited. It was important for them to write down the schedule first since they were not capable of making up a schedule on the spot.

After they had each thought about their schedules, students were paired up and told to ask each other questions to find out what their partner usually does on a school day. They were allowed to take notes while listening to their partner. The conversation within the pairs was often as follows:

Student A: What do you do?

Student B: I go to school.

Student A: Then, what do you do?

Student B: I play baseball.

Student A: Then, what do you do?

Student B: I come home.

They then had to orally report their partner's schedule to the class, which forced them to use 3SG agreement. The target outcome was something like the following:

Student A: My partner is Takeshi. He goes to school.

Then, he plays baseball.

Then, he comes home.

The oral reports were tape-recorded to examine the students' gains in knowledge on 3SG agreement and to analyze the ratio of errors made. After all the students made the first

report, I pointed out some mistakes in their sentences and we discussed the grammatical form. The students were then asked to do the oral reports again.

Some mechanical exercises from the textbook were assigned as homework and the students were also told to review the grammar item to prepare for the quiz in the next class. Three days after the first class, the second two-hour-long class was held. Another communicative task, an information gap exercise, was conducted in the second class following the grammar quiz. A grammar review was not conducted in the second class. The class was therefore a reasonable setting to observe students' retention on 3SG agreement during a communicative activity.

The students were paired and each student was given either the task sheet (A) or (B). The task sheets were as follows:

Task sheet (A)

John's Schedule

(                    )

夕食を食べる eat dinner

Sally's schedule

数学を勉強する study math

本を読む read a book

Task Sheet (B)

Sally's schedule

(                    )

本を読む read a book

John's Schedule

野球をする play baseball

夕食を食べる eat dinner

John and Sally's activities were written in Japanese so that the students had to think of the phrases in English when they conveyed the information to their partners. They were expected to use John and Sally as subjects of the sentences and produce 3SG agreement in their sentences. They were instructed to fill in the blanks in Japanese, which would encourage their active thinking participation.

After the task was completed, the students had to report John and Sally's schedule in writing instead of an oral report on the information gap. Improvement on 3SG agreement use among the students should be observed in this written report if the FonF activities enhanced the students' acquisition on the target form.

### **Findings**

Two communicative tasks, interview and information gap activities, on FonF were designed to teach 3SG agreement in English at a cram school to first year junior high school students. The students' performance on the use of the target grammar form was analyzed through recorded oral reports from an interview activity and written reports from an information gap activity.

In the oral reports from the interview in the first class, 34 sentences were observed

and among these, only 1 sentence had 3SG agreement (97% error). The students were not reminded specifically to use a certain form of verb prior to this task. Also, they were not given any negative feedback during the report. Considering that the form was only introduced within the preceding 2 hours and that the students are in the lowest level, it was expected that the target form would not be observed in the first communicative activity.

After the poor result, I wrote 2 sentences on the board:

(1) I go to school.

(2) \*She go to school.

Then, I asked the students if both sentences were correct. Soon, one student noticed that 3SG agreement is missing on (2). We then reviewed the target form and I asked the students to report their partner's schedule again orally. This time, 29 of 31 (6% error) sentences were correct. This result suggests that students can at least produce the correct form immediately after the linguistic forms were reviewed.

In the second class, students were first given a quiz on 3SG agreement. The questions on the quiz were from the homework assignment that they were given in the first class. All the students had perfect scores and thus the class moved to the information gap activity immediately without any grammar review. The students seemed to enjoy the activity. I did not tape-record the students' performance during the activity but visited each pair and corrected any observed errors.

The students were asked to write John and Sally's schedule from the task sheet after they finished the information gap activity with their partners. A low rate of errors was also observed from the written report (5 errors among 40 sentences; 12.5% error).

Comparing the initial error rate (97%) through the oral reports and the final error rate (12.5%) from the written reports, these error rates should be considered signs of understanding, and the use of the activities can be considered successful.

## Conclusion

In this study, I designed communicative tasks and examined whether the junior high school students who had previously only been taught English through such traditional methods as grammar translation could learn 3SG agreement through a FonF approach. Specifically, I conducted two communicative activities following the explicit grammar explanation and mechanical practice when teaching 3SG agreement to first year junior high school students at *juku*. Through oral and written reports by students, the errors on the sentences were analyzed to examine the acquisition rate on the target form.

On the oral report conducted in the first class after the explicit grammar instruction, 97% error was observed. After the grammar review, the students made the report again and

this time, only 6% of sentences had errors. In the second class, the students made written reports without any formal grammar instruction and the observed error rate was only 12.5%. Comparing these error rates, we should conclude that the use of the activities can only be considered successful. The only thing that remains to be seen is the long term retention of the information since in SLA, acquisition on 3SG agreement is considered to occur in a late stage. Thus, follow-up studies are planned.

Finally, it seemed that after participating in these tasks for two classes, the students seemed to feel comfortable enough to talk to each other and they started to peer correct, which I have never observed before. Although this was the first time for the students to experience a semi-communicative class, they seemed to enjoy the activities while focusing on a form and the class was considered a success.

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