

**1 1 . Learning the Interface between Semantico-Pragmatics
and Morpho-Syntax in L2: A Case Study (1)**

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Abstract:

Differentiating the usage of particles may be one of the most difficult aspects to acquire for Japanese as a foreign / second language (JFL/JSL) learners. Among the various usages of the particles, the particle *ga* (used in identificational sentences) seems to present special difficulties for JFL learners. Instructional effects of negative feedback were analyzed in a case study of a single participant to determine whether the intervention was effective in helping the JFL participant to learn this difficult aspect of JFL. Provision of negative feedback was given to the participant using an instructional software running on a Macintosh computer. Experimental sessions consisted of three sessions: There was a 2-day interval between the first and the second; a 2-week interval between the second and third. The intervention was made only in the first half of the Session 1. The effects were found to vary according to the type of NP in the sentence-initial position possibly due to the influence of English, her first language.

1. Introduction

This is a part of a larger study which examines effects of output (Swain, 1985, 1993, 1996; Swain & Lapkin, 1994) and metalinguistic negative (or corrective) feedback in acquisition of the Japanese particle *ga* by Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) learners. Of the two types of interventions in the larger study, this particular paper focuses on the effect of negative feedback in JFL learners' acquisition of the interface between semantico-pragmatics and morpho-syntax which appears in focus marking in Japanese. Negative or corrective feedback is defined as follows:

[It has] to do with externally provided information to the second language (L2) learning student, first language (L1) learning child, or the experimental subject [sic]..., either (1) that the production or activity of that student, child, or subject was in some way anomalous, unacceptable, or deviant, or (2) that the activity produced had not achieved its goal.

(Schachter, 1991, p. 89)

Although little role has generally been ascribed to negative evidence in L1 acquisition (2) and Universal Grammar (UG) based SLA theories (3), many empirical SLA studies have found that negative or corrective feedback is effective in SLA (Tomasello and Herron, 1988, 1989; Herron and Tomasello, 1988; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Carroll, Roberge, & Swain, 1990; Carroll &

Swain, 1993; White, 1991; White, Spada, & Lightbown, 1991). However, target language items used in many of these previous studies had to do with syntactic domains only. (4) There are few published experimental studies which have addressed whether negative feedback is effective in adults' acquiring/learning L2 grammar aspects which have to do with semantico-pragmatics.

2. Learning Problem

JFL learners have particular difficulty with the particle *ga* (Russell, 1985), which occurs in argument-focus sentences or identificational sentences (Lambrecht, 1994). (5) Learners often confuse this *ga* with *wa*, which is required in other types of sentences (see below).

Identificational sentences are those in which "focus" falls on a missing "argument" (6) of an open proposition (Lambrecht, 1994). In Japanese, such identificational sentences can be expressed in two ways depending on whether "focus" falls on the subject or the predicate of a sentence.

• Rule 1

When "focus" falls on the subject of a sentence, the focus must be followed by *ga* :

- Example: (1.0) (To the question "Who is the P.M. of Japan?")
- a. Hashimoto san ga nihon no syusyoo desu.
Mr. Hashimoto Japan GEN P.M. COP
 focus
- b. Mr. Hashimoto is the P.M. of Japan.

• Rule 2

When "focus" falls on the predicate of a sentence, the focus must be preceded by *wa* :

- Example: (1.1) (To the question "Who is the P.M. of Japan?")
- a. nihon no syusyoo wa Hashimoto san desu.
 Japan GEN P.M. Mr. Hashimoto COP
 focus
- b. The P.M. of Japan is Mr. Hashimoto.

Such identificational sentences, especially (1.1)b, are often confused with descriptive sentences of apparently similar surface syntactic structure, i.e. topic-comment sentences. In the topic-comment sentence (2.0)a where the focus falls on the syntactic predicate, *wa* rather than *ga* is demanded. Note that in (2.0)a, the focus falls on *nihon no syusyoo desu* or *the P.M. of Japan*.

- Example: (2.0) (To the question “What is Mr. Hashimoto?”)
- a. Hashimoto san wa nihon no syusyoo desu.
 Mr. Hashimoto Japan GEN P.M. COP
 focus
- b. Mr. Hashimoto is the P.M. of Japan.

Topic-comment structure is the unmarked pragmatic sentence structure in many languages (Givón, 1994; Lambrecht, 1994). This may result in English native speakers’ preference for using *wa* over *ga* in general. In addition to the fact that the function of topic-comment structure embodies is unmarked, morphological marking of a semantic argument is not obligatory in English, but it is in Japanese. Further, there are hierarchies among nouns in their tendency to be the topic of a sentence in English (Halliday, 1985; Givón, 1994). Some generic topic hierarchies (Givón, 1994) are presented below. Note that one of these hierarchies depends on discourse participation, e.g., first person, second person, and third person.

- (3.0) The generic topic hierarchies:
- | | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Discourse participation: | speaker > hearer > 3rd-person |
| Definiteness: | definite > indefinite |
| Anaphoricity: | pronoun > full-NP |

(Givón, 1994, p. 22)

The above hierarchies indicate that personal pronouns, especially first person, are more likely to be topics. If particular noun categories are preferred as topics in English, learners of such background may have difficulty with specific types of identificational sentences which require *ga* in Japanese (e.g., identificational sentences in which pronoun ‘I’ is followed by *ga*). Such preference may explain English native speakers’ predilection, in Japanese, for commonly using *wa* rather than *ga*, even where *ga* is absolutely required (cf. the example in Fig. 1 below).

As the above examples (1.0), (1.1), and (2.0) illustrate, JFL learners require the following skills to use *ga* correctly in identificational sentences:

- They need to find about speech context: Whether they would identify something or describe something.
- They need to know what information is missing on the level of a proposition: What the focus is at the propositional (or semantic) level.
- They need to determine whether the focus falls on the subject or the predicate of a sentence: How such focus corresponds to syntactic constituents of a sentence.

To recapitulate, the aims of this particular case study are: 1) to determine whether negative feedback is effective in helping a JFL learner to learn the link between “focus,” a semantico-pragmatic category, and its morpho-syntactic realization in Japanese; 2) to assess how the participant’s learning evolved; and 3) to determine the variability in the effect of the feedback depending on types of NPs involved.

3. Method

3.1 Participant

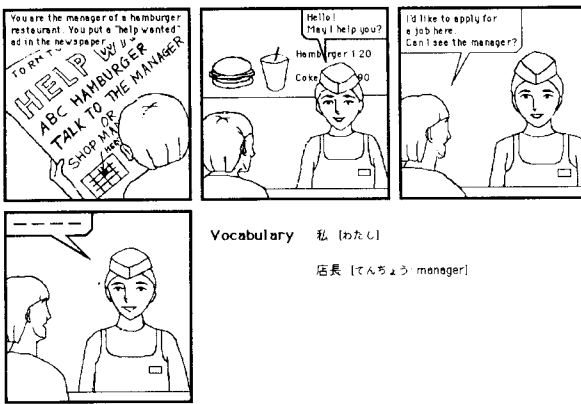
The participant of this study was a native speaker of English, age 28, who had been studying Japanese at a university in North America for 5 years and had stayed in Japan for about 1 year.

3.2 Materials and Tasks

The target language structure is “NP1 *ga* NP2 copula” of identificational sentence types where focus falls on the subject (on NP1). All NPs which come at the subject position are those whose referent is identifiable from either cartoon contexts or world knowledge. The participant looked at a cartoon on a computer screen and assumed a role of one of the persons in the cartoon (See Figure 1). The cartoon lacks one of the sentences for the role played by the participant. She was asked to construct an appropriate sentence(s) (identificational or topic-comment) to fill the blank for the context. Next, she was asked to produce the sentence construction orally. Then, she

answered by typing a key for the sentence(s) displayed on the screen, (7) which most closely corresponded to her construction.

To make sure that she understood the difference between ‘topic-comment’ sentences (which has a form of syntactic predicate-focus) and a type of identificational sentence with focus on the syntactic predicate, she was asked to provide both types (syntactic subject-focus or syntactic predicate-focus) of the identificational sentences. Thus, in the case for the Figure 1, she has to present ‘*watasi ga tentyoo desu*’ and ‘*tentyoo wa watasi desu.*’



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Figure 1. A screen shot of one of the cartoons.

3.3 Design and Procedure

All the sessions were carried out using a laptop computer (a PowerBook) and instructional software created by the author using *SuperLab*. Following the participant's visit for pre-tests and a background questionnaire, there were 3 sessions in about a 3-week period. Procedures in each session were as shown below:

Session 1 (2 1/2 hours)

Recollection (5 items):	answer; self-assessment; recollection.
Treatment (36 items):	output; answer; feedback when incorrect.
Transfer (18 items):	answer;
Recollection (6 items):	answer; self-assessment; recollection
Interview	

Session 2 (1 1/2 hours, a few days after Session 1)

Recollection:	the same as Session 1
Testing:	the same items used, but without output nor feedback
Testing:	the same as Session 1
Recollection:	the same as Session 1
Interview	

Session 3 (1 1/2 hours, 2 weeks after Session 2)

The same procedures as used in Session 2
Interview

At the beginning and end of each session, there were retrospection phases: In the retrospection phases, after she had committed to her answer sentence(s), she was asked to reconstruct her mental processes she had gone through in producing the sentence(s) (for a cartoon). In this particular case report, no mention will be made on the retrospective data, nor of interview data.

3.4 Metalinguistic Negative Feedback

Negative feedback was provided in text on the computer screen soon after the participant made an error. The feedback took the form of metalinguistic explanation, in English, about Japanese focus marking mechanisms so that the participant would understand underlying rules for the target language item. The provision of feedback was limited to items in the treatment phase (the first half) of Session 1. In all other phases, the latter half of Session 1, and all of Session 2 and Session 3, no negative feedback or other information was given in response to any of her errors.

4. Results

In general the intervention was found to be effective. However, the effect varied in degree and lastingness depending on the types of NPs involved in the sentences.

Results by sequence

In the first recollection phase in Session 1, where no feedback had been intended, the participant made errors in all the four identificational sentences, but was correct for a topic-comment sentence. It is speculated that had she not received feedback she would have continued to make serious errors in all identificational sentences.

Results by NP category (NPs at the sentence-initial position)

• **First Person Pronoun (PPN1)**

In S1, feedback was planned on items 2-6 and actually given on items 2 and 5. The effect of treatment was dramatic as shown in the sharp rise in the number of correct responses for Session 1 (See Figure 2). The participant obtained almost perfect scores in Session 2. To the researcher's surprise, however, her learning was not sustained in Session 3, where her success rate dropped to 30 % at the end.

Accumulated Numbers of Correct Responses on 1st person pronouns (PPN1) Questions

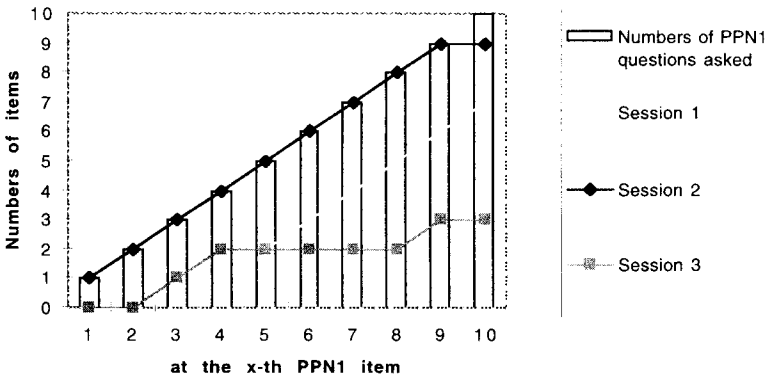


Figure 2. Accumulated numbers of correct responses on first person pronoun (PPN1) questions.

• **Second Person Pronoun (PPN2)**

For PPN2 items, feedback was planned on items 2-4, and was actually given on all of those. In Session 1, the participant had no success in identificational sentences, despite the fact she received feedback on her errors for items 2-4 (See Figure 3). In Session 2 the effect showed to some extent; this was carried over to Session 3 where 80% success was attained.

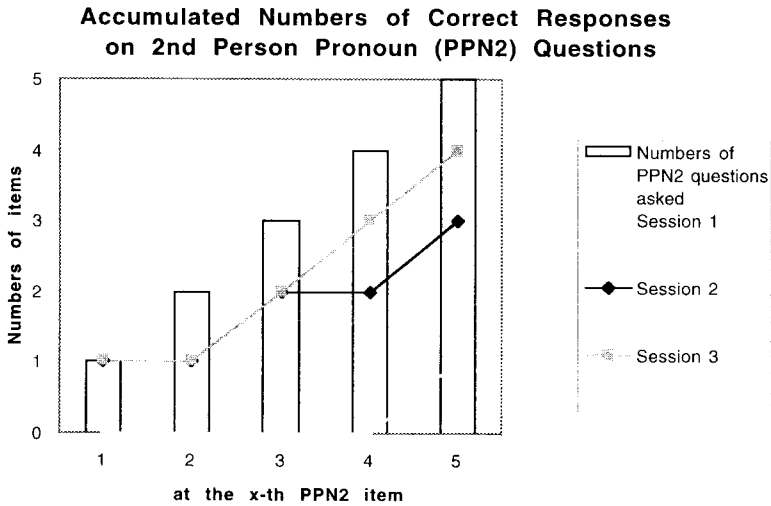


Figure 3. Accumulated numbers of correct responses on second person pronoun (PPN2) questions.

• **Third Person Pronoun (PPN3)**

The effects for this type of pronoun were similar to those for second person. In Session 1, feedback was planned on items 1-3, but none was actually given. Therefore, the participant had no opportunity to benefit from feedback beginning with items 1-3. In Session 2, she had about 60% success; in session 3 she had 80% success at the end (See Figure 4).

Accumulated Numbers of Correct Responses on 3rd Person Pronoun (PPN3) Questions

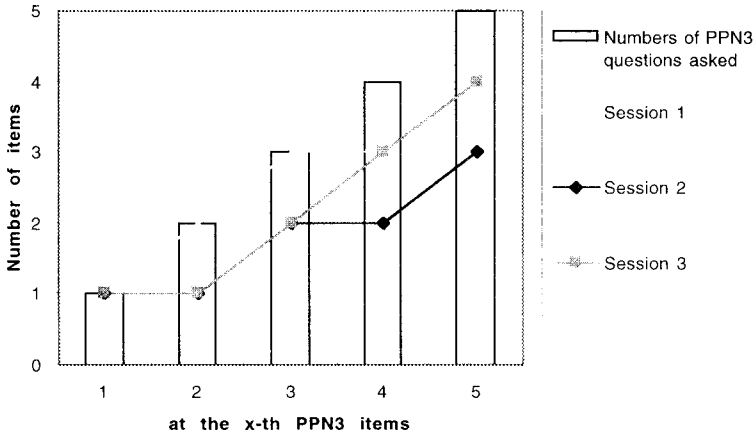


Figure 4. Accumulated numbers of correct responses on third person pronoun (PPN3) questions.

• Proper Name & Common Noun (PCN)

In Session 1, feedback was planned on items 2-9, and was actually given on item 7 only. Thus, in this session, the participant gave almost all correct responses, with one instance of feedback (See Figure 5). In Session 2, she had a perfect score. In Session 3, she had a nearly perfect score. In contrast to the case for PPN1, for PCN, the success rate was maintained near 100% across sessions after the first.

Accumulated Numbers of Correct Responses on Proper Name and Common Noun (PCN) Questions

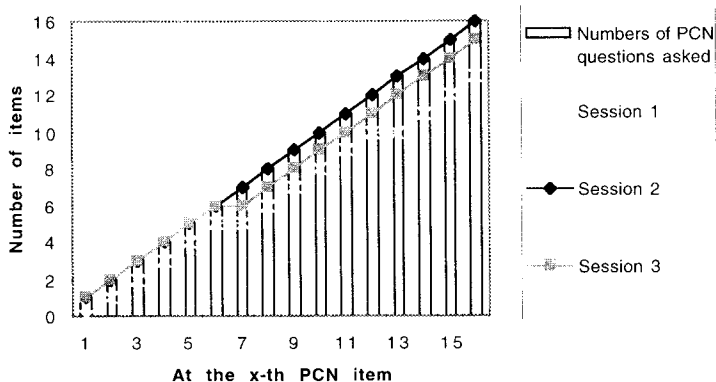


Figure 5. Accumulated numbers of correct responses on proper name and common noun (PCN) questions.

• Participant’s Errors on PPN1

Analysis of the participant’s errors on PPN1 items revealed that she overgeneralized the information in the feedback, and made up a rule which was based on ‘topic-comment’ sentence types. Her purported rule yielded “NP1 *wa* NP2” and “NP2 *ga* NP1” where focus falls on NP1. She applied the wrong rule to identificational sentences, and worse, to a topic-comment sentence.

5. Discussion

The results suggest that the treatment had variable effects on the participant’s learning of *ga* in identificational sentences, within the time period studied. Nonetheless, to determine whether the treatment is generally effective will require gathering data from more participants, and over longer periods if possible.

Though not conclusively demonstrated, it is possible that the difference found in the outcome of the learning depending on NP types could be partly due to differences between English and Japanese:

1) in that English, unlike Japanese, does not grammaticize pragmatic differences morpho-syntactically;

2) in how strongly certain NP types are associated with definiteness in a language.

As for 1), English is probably as topic-prominent a language as Japanese. Unlike Japanese, however, English does not grammaticize the pragmatic-functional distinction (focusness or topicness) in the sentence-initial NPs by means of morphological marking. Since topic-comment structure is the unmarked pragmatic sentence structure, English L1 speakers are inclined to associate topicness with the sentence-initial NPs (the syntactic subject) in the language. (8) As for 2), that is, the relative likelihood for certain NP types to be a topic. The referent of common or generic NPs and proper names tend to be easier to identify and thus to represent in the speaker's / listener's minds. Such identifiability relates to the definiteness, and the definiteness of NPs can be linked to the NP's topicality. Therefore, it is argued that common or generic NPs and proper names are more likely to be topics (cf. Li and Thompson, 1976, p. 461). Interestingly, there is a difference in degrees of definiteness in personal pronouns (PPNs) between English and Japanese (Noguchi, 1997). (9) English PPNs are more definite than their Japanese counterparts, suggesting that the English PPNs are more prone to be associated with topicness than those of Japanese. If the English L1 participant had applied the definiteness associated with the English PPNs to the Japanese PPNs, she must have found it easier to assign topicness to sentence-initial Japanese PPNs and, subsequently, harder to treat such PPNs as focus NPs.

In order to see if the above differences in attainment were precisely due to the difference in topic- or subject-prominence between L1 and L2, further studies with more participants will be necessary. A larger-scale investigation undertaken by the author following this particular case study may shed some light on that problem.

6. Conclusion

This limited intervention in a particular context suggests 1) there is some effectiveness in the present case of negative feedback; and 2) there is difficulty in predicting effects of such feedback even when syntactic forms of the target language items are kept constant. Had the participant received feedback in Session 3, again, when her overgeneralization errors occurred, negative feedback would have been more effective, and also there would have been less variability found in the correctness of her responses across NP types. This study suggests that for negative

feedback to be effective in L2 learning, the feedback has to be: the most specific, tailor-made to the particular situation; and provided (not at every error but) cyclically (even if intermittent). Such feedback will have substantial and lasting benefit.

Notes

1 This is a modified version of a paper which was presented at the 11th World Congress of Applied Linguistics (AILA '96) in Jyväskylä, Finland, on August 6, 1996, under the title "Effects of negative feedback in learning focus marking in JFL." I thank Prof. Andrew Chesterman of University of Helsinki for helpful comments on my AILA '96 presentation. I am also grateful to Prof. Merrill Swain of the Ontario Institute for the Studies in Education of the University of Toronto for her advice on the larger scale study, of which the present study is a pilot. Of course, any remaining errors are my own. I am also thankful to *the Gengo Kyoiku Shinko Zaidan* for financial support of this study.

2 cf. Aitkinson (1986).

3 Positions taken by people such as Gregg (1988, 1996) and Flynn (1996) fall into this category.

4 It can be said that most of the target language items Tomasello and Herron used in their earlier study (1989) are syntactic, although they say most of those items are semantic/pragmatic in their rebuttal article (1991) to Beck and Eubank's (1991) critique. Areas where semantic/pragmatic considerations were involved in their target items are mostly in choosing lexical items.

5 Russell (1985) uses a terminology "exhaustive-listing" following Kuno (1972, 1973) instead of terms such as 'argument-focus' and 'identificational' by Lambrecht (1994).

6 The term "argument" here do *not* mean *syntactic* argument, but rather *semantic* argument.

7 The respective screen is not shown in this paper.

8 English is said to be a subject-prominent language, and Japanese a both subject-prominent and topic-prominent (Li and Thompson, 1976, p. 460). Such explanations have a certain appeal in explaining inter-lingual phenomena between the two languages. But one has to be cautious in accepting such *prima facie* categorizations and applying them in analyzing data. The present author contemplates that English's mere lack of grammaticized topic marker may have lead Li and Thompson to think that English is a (syntactic or grammaticized) subject-prominent language while Japanese a (syntactic or grammaticized) subject-prominent and (grammaticized) topic-prominent language.

9 Noguchi (1997) says that Japanese PPNs behave like open-class nouns, suggesting that Japanese PPNs are "lexical than functional and nouns rather than determiners" (p. 777).

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