

Contextual factors affecting Japanese English learners' use of unaccusative verbs

Kazuharu Owada¹ and Eiichiro Tsutsui²

¹Tokyo College of Music, ²Faculty of Pharmaceutical Sciences, Hiroshima International University

owadakazu@aoni.waseda.jp, tsutsui@ic.hirokoku-u.ac.jp

Abstract

Unaccusative verbs pose serious challenges for Japanese learners of English because these verbs are difficult to conceptualize and are context-sensitive. One explanation for why Japanese learners have difficulty acquiring these unaccusative verbs is that situations where these verbs are appropriate are contextually limited.

In this study animation was used to elicit target unaccusative verbs from the students. The results reveal that students showed sensitivity to the context and changed their preferences accordingly.

Keywords

unaccusative verbs, animation

1 Introduction

There has been a number of studies on the acquisition of unaccusative (intransitive) verbs by Japanese learners of English. These studies have used various tasks to elicit student data such as grammatical judgment tasks, production tasks, translation tasks and discourse completion tasks. Although a grammatical judgment task is one task used widely among them, there are some problems regarding its method and analysis.

Therefore, in this study, we will use animation for the elicitation of target verbs so that we can relate the contextual information to the students' conceptualization.

2 Previous SLA studies on unaccusative verbs

Several studies have been conducted on the acquisition of unaccusative verbs by Japanese learners of English (e.g., Hirakawa, 1997). Most of them classified the verb types based on certain syntactic features without considering the individual behaviors and semantic features of each particular verb in context.

3 This study

3.1 The purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine whether Japanese learners of English show variation in their judgment of two types of unaccusative verbs: one non-alteranting unaccusative (*fall*) and one alternanting unaccusative verb (*close*).

3.2 Research questions

The research questions in this study are as follows:

1. Do Japanese learners of English show sensitivity to the contexts where *fall* and *close* are used?
2. Do they know how to use the verb *fall* correctly?
3. Do they change their preferences in contexts where *close* is used?

3.3 Participants

Participants in this study were 32 second-year students who majored in English Language and Literature at a private Japanese University.

3.4 Material and procedure

Six contexts including two target verbs, i.e., *fall*, *close*, were used for this study, as shown below:

Context 1: fall (A girl falls down the stairs by making a false step.)

Context 2: fall (A girl falls down the stairs because someone pushes her.)

Context 3: close (The flowers close.)

Context 4: close (The train doors close before a boy gets on the train.)

Context 5: close (The train doors close after a boy gets on train.)

Context 6: close (The library gate is closed.)

The students were asked to choose one sentence among three sentences after having watched a short animation for each target verb. The three sentences were intransitive, transitive and passive sentences. An example of the test items was given below:

Animation for the Context 1:



Instruction for the Context 1:

Choose one sentence which you are most likely to say to describe what happens in the animation.

- () She is fallen down the stairs.
- () The stairs fall her.
- () She falls down the stairs.

3.5 Results

3.5.1 Contexts 1 and 2

As in Table 1, about 91% (29 out of 32) of the students chose the intransitive form in Context 1, where the girl falls down the stairs by making a false step ($\chi^2(2) = 47.69, p < .0001$).

Table 1. Context 1:fall (N=32)

Intransitive	Transitive	Passive
29	0	3

However, as Table 2 shows, in Context 2, where someone pushes the girl and she falls down the stairs, they preferred the transitive form over the intransitive form, even though both the transitive and passive forms are ungrammatical ($\chi^2(2) = 5.69, p = .058$).

Table 2. Context 2: fall (N=32)

Intransitive	Transitive	Passive
7	17	8

As is shown in Table 3, when we consider how the students have changed their preferences, we can see that only about 22% (7 out of 32) have acquired the use of *fall*. The students changed their preferences from the intransitive to the transitive/passive form than the other way round (Binominal two-tailed test, $p < .0001$).

Table 3. Contexts 1 and 2 (N=32)

Context 1 \ Context 2	Context 2		
	Intransitive	Trans./Pass.	Combined
Intransitive	7	22	29
Trans./Pass.	0	3	3
Total	7	25	32

3.5.2 Context 3

Most of the students preferred the intransitive for the flower context over the transitive and passive ($\chi^2(2) = 21.81, p < .0001$). Even so, we cannot exclude the possibility that some students think that flowers do not open by themselves and that the external force is necessary to make them open.

Table 4. Context 3 (N=32)

Intransitive	Transitive	Passive
23	3	6

3.5.3 Contexts 4 and 5

As is shown in Tables 5 and 6, we can see a noticeable difference between the two contexts. As in Table 5, in Context 4, where the doors close in front of the boy before he gets on, about 44% (14 out of 32) chose the intransitive ($\chi^2(2) = 6.25, p = .044$). However, Table 6 shows that about 72% (23 out of 32) preferred the passive in Context 5, where the doors close after the boy gets on ($\chi^2(2) = 21.44, p < .0001$). This difference indicates that some factors in the given contexts may have influenced the students' preferences.

Table 5. Context 4: close (N=32)

Intransitive	Transitive	Passive
14	4	14

Table 6. Context 5: close (N=32)

Intransitive	Transitive	Passive
4	5	23

3.5.4 Context 6

Table 7 indicates that in Context 6, where the library is closed, most of the students chose the stative passive form ($\chi^2(2) = 43.00, p < .0001$).

Table 7. Context 6: close (N=32)

Intransitive	Transitive	Passive
4	0	28

4 Conclusion

Three findings can be drawn from this study. First, the students showed their sensitivity to the context and changed their preferences for the verb form according to the context. Second, some students have not fully acquired the verb *fall*. Although they accepted its correct grammatical intransitive form in one context, they accepted its incorrect ungrammatical transitive or passive form. And third, as for the verb *close*, even in similar contexts such as the train doors closing, some factors can influence students' preferences.

References

Hirakawa, M. (1997). On the unaccusative/unergative distinction in SLA. *JACET BULLETIN*. 2, 17-27.

Owada, K. (2000). Japanese learners' conceptualizations of unaccusative verbs: *open* and *close* with special reference to contextual effects, *Gakujutsu kenkyu* [Academic studies], *School of Education, Waseda University: Series of English Language & Literature*. 48, 55-75.

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI 22520585.