

Japanese EFL learners' metalinguistic knowledge of transitivity of English verbs: A questionnaire survey

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Abstract

Japanese university students learning English are said to have difficulty acquiring two types of unaccusative verbs: alternating unaccusative verbs and non-alternating unaccusative verbs (e.g., Hirakawa, 2003). One of the reasons might be attributed to the fact that they have not received enough grammar instruction on the transitivity of such verbs.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the results of an online questionnaire survey on how well first-year university students understand the transitivity of verbs. A total of 290 university students participated in this online survey, which was based on Iwasaki (1998). The results suggest that having explicit knowledge of transitivity of verbs alone does not translate well into the actual uses of various verbs.

Keywords

questionnaire survey, intransitive verbs, transitive verb, explicit knowledge

1 Introduction

Japanese English learners (JELs) are said to have difficulty acquiring two types of unaccusative verbs: alternating unaccusative verbs such as *break* and *open* and non-alternating unaccusative verbs such as *fall* and *happen*. Some previous SLA studies have indicated that JELs tend to prefer the passive of non-alternating unaccusative verbs (e.g., **An accident was happened*) and prefer the passive of an alternating unaccusative verb (e.g., *The glass was broken* rather than *The glass broke*) in contexts where the intransitive is called for. Since most of these previous studies are based on the results of grammatical judgment given by the participants, it remains to be determined whether their judgement comes from their metalinguistic, or explicit knowledge of transitivity of verbs (e.g., Ellis, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to report on the

results of an online survey questionnaire on how well first-year Japanese university students, who are fresh out of high school, understand the transitivity of verbs. A total of 290 university students participated in this online survey. Based on Iwasaki (1998), the questionnaire items included the following: 1) whether university students have metalinguistic, or explicit knowledge of what intransitive/transitive verbs are, 2) whether they can determine if a verb in isolation is intransitive, transitive, or both, 3) whether they can judge a verb in a sentence as intransitive or transitive, and 4) whether they can provide a correct grammatical judgment to several verbs in a sentence form.

2 The present study

2.1 Participants

A total of 290 first-year Japanese students participated in the online survey. Of those, 218 students were economics majors at a private university in the Kansai region, and 72 students were engineering majors at a public university in the Kyushu region. Their level of English proficiency is considered to be intermediate.

2.2 The questionnaire used in this study

The questionnaire consisted of four main parts. The first part asked the students for their explicit knowledge of intransitive and transitive verbs. The second part, including 40 items of verbs, asked the students to identify whether the verb has either intransitive only, transitive only, or both intransitive and transitive uses. The third part, including 6 items of sentences containing one verb, asked the students to identify whether the underlined verb is either intransitive or transitive. The fourth part, including 6 items of grammatical judgment, asked the students to choose either the intransitive form or the passive form of a verb in a sentence.

Regarding the second part, 40 verbs were selected as target verbs. The classification of them

was based on Liu (2008). The verbs tested in this section are shown below:

- a. Non-alternating unaccusative verbs: *appear, arrive, come, die, disappear, exist, fall, happen, occur, rise*
- b. Alternating unaccusative verbs: *boil, break, burn, close, drop, fly, freeze, grow, melt, open*
- c. Unergative intransitive verbs: *cry, laugh, skate, smile, swim*
- d. Transitive-converted intransitive verbs (which have transitive use): *drink, eat, play, read, sing*
- e. Object-deleting intransitive verbs (which have transitive use): *forget, know, remember, see, understand*
- f. Pure transitive verbs: *create, destroy, invite, receive, respect*

3 Results and discussion

3.1 Part One

Out of 290 students who participated in the questionnaire, 145 students were able to correctly define what intransitive and transitive verbs are. They provided their answers along the lines of the following: *Transitive verbs require an object, while intransitive verbs do not*. In the following discussion, the responses given by those 145 students are reported.

3.2 Part Two

Here the results of (a) mentioned above are reported. The students were asked to determine whether ten non-alternating unaccusative verbs, have intransitive only, transitively only, or both intransitive and transitive uses. Since this type of verbs has only intransitive uses, the students were expected to choose ‘intransitive only’ as the correct answer. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: The correct rate for non-alternating unaccusative verbs ($n=145$)

a. Non-alternating unaccusative verbs	Correct Rate
<i>appear</i>	52.4%
<i>arrive</i>	66.2%
<i>come</i>	42.8%
<i>die</i>	65.5%
<i>disappear</i>	53.1%
<i>exist</i>	60.0%
<i>fall</i>	42.1%
<i>happen</i>	42.1%
<i>occur</i>	41.4%
<i>rise</i>	42.1%

The verbs *arrive, die, and exist* showed a high correct rate of more than 60%, that is, 66.2%, 65.5%,

and 60.0%, respectively. On the other hand, the correct rates of *fall, happen, occur, and rise* are just over 40%. This is very much in line with previous studies that have shown that JELs English have difficulty with these verbs.

3.3 Part Three

The students were asked to judge six underlined verbs as either intransitive or transitive. The students correctly judged the transitivity of the target verbs at the correct rate of more than 70%.

3.4 Part Four

The target verbs here were three non-alternating unaccusative verbs: *happen, fall, appear*. When the students were asked to choose either the intransitive form or ungrammatical passive form (e.g., *happened* or *was happened*), they responded at the high correct rate of more than 70%.

4 Conclusion

The results indicate that although the students seemed to have explicit knowledge of transitivity of verbs, they were not able to correctly judge the transitivity of verbs in isolation but were able to correctly judge the transitivity of the underlined verbs in a sentence and also correctly choose the intransitive form of three non-alternating unaccusative verbs.

Thus, this study suggests that there seems to be a gap between their explicit knowledge of transitivity of verbs and the actual implementation of this knowledge to a particular verb. One possible explanation might be that their explicit knowledge of transitivity is transferable only to its prototypical uses.

References

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