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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Effects of teaching reduced forms in a university preparatory course

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The participants were 19 international students who took English in a university preparatory course in Japan. The aims of this paper are (a) to show the effects of teaching reduced forms and (b) to suggest some implications for English learning in a preparatory university course for international students in Japan. The results have revealed that (a) teaching reduced forms did not improve the scores of TOEIC Listening Sections, (b) teaching reduced forms significantly improved their listening ability to recognize words, and (c) international students enjoyed learning reduced forms using pop songs in English lessons.

参加者は日本で準備教育課程において英語を学習している19名の留学生である。この論文の目的は (a) reduced forms の効果を調べることと (b) 日本の準備教育課程における英語学習に示唆を与えることである。その結果、(a) reduced formsを教えることによってTOEICのリスニングセクションの得点は向上しなかった。(b) reduced formsを教えることによって単語を認識するリスニング能力は向上した。(c) 留学生はポップソングを使用しながらreduced formsを学ぶことを楽しんでいただけたことが明らかになった。

Reduced forms

English learners often have great problems in comprehending simple conversation with native speakers. One of the reasons is *reduced forms* that occur in informal speech, which is also called *connected speech*, referring to “spoken language when analyzed as a continuous sequence, as in normal utterances and conversations” (Crystal, 1980, p.81). Brown and Hilferty (1986) use reduced forms as the processes of contraction, elision, assimilation, and reduction. Table1 shows the definitions and examples of these terms.

Table 1. Kinds of reduced forms

	Definitions	Examples
Contraction	“a way of showing the reduced characteristics of spoken language in written language” (Brown & Brown, 2007, p.4)	I’ve, they’ll, we’re
Elision	“a process of elimination or dropping of phonemes (vowels or consonants) that would be present in the citation of a word or phrase” (Brown & Brown, 2007, p.3)	last night /t/ of “last” may be deleted.
Assimilation	“a process whereby one phenomenon is changed into another because of the influence of nearby phenomena” (Brown & Brown, 2007, p.4)	don’t you /t/ + /j/ => tʃu
Reduction	“a process that occurs in connected speech, in which phonemes of the language are changed, minimized, or eliminated in order to facilitate pronunciation” (Brown & Brown, 2007, p.3)	Vowels in unstressed syllables are reduced to schwa /ə /. could => /kəd/

There have been some studies (e.g., Brown & Hilferty, 1986, 2007; Ito, 2007; Matsuzawa, 2007) on reduced forms. For example, Brown and Hilferty (2007) revealed teaching reduced forms helped listening comprehension among

English as a foreign language (EFL) students in the People’s Republic of China. Matsuzawa investigated the effect of explicit instruction of reduced forms among Japanese business people.

Brown and Brown (2007, p.5) suggests why we should teach connected speech as follows:

- Connected speech is a very real part of language.
- Students need to learn more than the traditional grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation that many language teachers present; connected speech is an important subset of the new information they need to learn.
- Students need to be able to adjust their styles and registers in using language; the ability to understand and use connected speech is essential for making such adjustments.
- Connected speech is not just lazy, sloppy, careless, or slovenly language; rather, it occurs in all levels of speech, including the most formal manners of speaking.

Purpose of the study

This study investigated the effect of teaching reduced forms. The participants were 19 international students who took English in a university preparatory course, which was designated by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for students from countries where the number of years required for the completion of secondary education is less than 12 and grants the

qualification to enter Japanese universities after completion of the course. Although there has been some research into the learning of Japanese by international students, there has been little research on international students who are studying English in a university preparatory course. A lot of international students, however, have been studying English at universities or university preparatory courses in Japan. Therefore, more attention should be paid to international students learning English in Japan. Thus, the aims of this presentation are (a) to show the effects of teaching reduced forms and (b) to suggest some implications for English learning in a preparatory university course for international students in Japan.

Research questions

The following research questions are addressed:

Research question 1: Does teaching reduced forms result in improving their TOEIC listening section scores?

Research question 2: Does teaching reduced forms result in improving their dictation close test scores?

Research question 3: Do the international students enjoy learning reduced forms using pop songs?

Methods

Participants

The participants, who were from mixed cultural and social backgrounds, were 19 international students who took English in a university preparatory course. There were 4 males and 15 females. Their nationalities were

as follows: Chinese (10 participants), Taiwanese (4 participants), Vietnamese (2 participants), Sri Lanka (1 participant), Bangladesh (1 participant), and Indian (1 participant). Their ages ranged from 18 to 28 years old.

Procedures

All participants received instruction on reduced forms in English lessons. The course met once a week for 90 minutes. Based on a course book, the instruction consisted of teaching reduced forms by means of listening and dictating pop songs. The teaching content included such reduced forms as contraction, assimilation, reduction, etc. In each chapter, the book first explains an idea related to reduced forms, and then provides dictation exercises of words, conversation, and songs. The examples are presented in Appendix A. In addition, reading section is provided at the each of each chapter.

Data collection and analysis

TOEIC listening sections and dictation close tests were conducted before and after the instruction. For research question 1, the scores of TOEIC listening sections before and after the instruction were compared using paired *t*-tests. For research question 2, the scores of dictation close tests (see Appendix B) before and after the instruction were compared using paired *t*-tests. For research question 3, the closed and open questions were conducted.

Results

Research question 1: Does teaching reduced forms result in improving their TOEIC listening section scores?

Results of paired tests for the scores of TOEIC listening sections before and after the instruction revealed that there were no significant differences between them (see Table 2).

Table 2. Differences between pre-and-post scores on TOEIC listening test and dictation close tests

	Pre		Post		t
	M	SD	M	SD	
TOEIC Listening Sections	17.93	5.57	20.21	4.19	-5.29**
Dictation Close Tests	19.64	10.72	33.79	6.22	-2.13

** $P < .01$.

Research question 2: Does teaching reduced forms result in improving their dictation close test scores?

Results of t -tests for the scores of dictation close tests before and after the instruction revealed that there were significant differences between them, $t(13) = -5.29, p < .01$. The scores of post-dictation close test were significantly higher than those of pre-dictation close test (see Table 2).

Question 3: Do the international students enjoy learning reduced forms using pop songs?

In March 2006, a questionnaire consisting of closed and open questions in Japanese was administered to the students.

Each item of the closed-ended statements with a 4-point Likert scale ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Table 3 shows the six statements and descriptive statistics for the questionnaire of students.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics for the questionnaire of students

	M	SD
1. Hit Parade is useful for you.	3.00	1.00
2. Your listening skills have improved.	3.18	0.73
3. You enjoyed the lessons.	3.65	0.49
4. It was difficult for you to dictate songs.	3.12	0.78
5. You enjoyed dictating songs.	3.76	0.44
6. It is useful for you to study reduced forms.	3.20	0.94

The open-ended section of the questionnaire asked respondents to write their impressions of the lessons. Selected student comments on the lessons are as follows:

- I enjoy this lesson. I want to continue studying English.
- This textbook is very interesting.
- I enjoy studying English through pop songs.
- My English has improved.
- What we learn in this lesson is easy for me.
- Learning reduced forms is not useful for me.

Discussion

Research question 1: Does teaching reduced forms result in improving their TOEIC listening section scores?

Results of paired tests for the scores of TOEIC listening sections before and after the instruction revealed that there were no significant differences between them. Why didn't TOEIC listening scores improve? Recognizing reduced forms is one of bottom-up processing, referring to “decoding the sounds of a language into words, clauses, sentences, etc” (Norris, 1995, p.47). In TOEIC listening sections, not only bottom-up processing but also top-down processing, referring to “using background knowledge or previous knowledge of the situation, context, and topic to interpret meaning”(Norris, 1995, p.47) is needed. Therefore, only teaching reduced forms might not improve the scores of TOEIC listening sections.

Research question 2: Does teaching reduced forms result in improving their dictation close test scores?

Teaching reduced forms significantly improved their listening ability to recognize words, which appeared on the dictation test. Thirty weeks of reduced forms lessons seemed to have a marked effect on performance on the reduced forms dictations. That is, given the reduced form instruction, the students improved their listening ability in recognizing the words. These findings partially confirm those of a previous study (Brown & Hilferty, 2007; Matsuzawa, 2007), where the results shows improvement in listening comprehension after teaching reduced forms.

Research question 3: Do the international students enjoy learning reduced forms using pop songs?

Table 3 demonstrated most of the participating students enjoyed the lessons, especially dictating songs. As several studies (e.g., Katanoda, 2005; Soda, 1994) have showed, English lessons using songs is effective in enhancing students' motivation and English abilities.

The students with lower proficiency tend to make positive comments on the lessons. However, the students with high English proficiency wrote, “What we learn in this lesson is easy for me”, “Learning reduced forms is not useful for me”. It seems that learning reduced forms is easy for the students with high English proficiency. In sum, most of the participating students, from various countries and with various backgrounds, enjoyed learning reduced forms using pop songs, although the students with high proficiency did not enjoy the activities as much.

Limitations

This study has limitations in that there was no control group and a small number of participants, thus the results cannot be generalized to other situations. Further research on a larger number of international students in an English program will be needed

Conclusions

In summary, this paper has shown the following: (a) teaching reduced forms did not improve the scores of TOEIC listening sections, (b) teaching reduced forms significantly

improved their listening ability to recognize words, and (c) international students enjoyed learning reduced forms using pop songs in English lessons. More research needs to be conducted on international students in an English program in Japan, specifically to search for more optimal methods for them, because the international students in a preparatory course are different from Japanese students in various perspectives.

Junko Matsuzaki Carreira received her M.A. in English Language and Literature and completed her doctoral course in Department of English and Literature at Tsuda College. She is a full-time lecturer at Tokyo Future University. Her research interests include affective factors contributing to language learning.

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Appendix A

Dictation Close Test (Kumai & Timson, 2003, p.154)

Listen and fill the blanks. Each sentence is repeated twice.

1. I think () () a great job.
2. Susan's in a hurry. () () to go there at once.
3. Lisa is very busy. She () () able to help me today.
4. She's late. I wonder () () her.
5. keep in touch. I'll () () once in a while.
6. what () () decide to come to Japan?
7. If you () () typed, it's going to cost you.
8. I don't () () here any longer.
9. We're landing soon. Please fasten your () ().
10. Sarah, you () () in that dress!
11. It's getting late. I () () you.
12. It's a piece of cake! I () () that with my eyes closed.
13. Don't worry. It'll () () somehow.
14. It'll () () better than you think.
15. I've () () of money. Can you lend me some?
16. come on in and () () at home.
17. Will you () () home after the party?

18. What's the name of the movie? () () tip of my tongue.
19. Can we meet () () station?
20. Why don't we () () at the next stop?

Appendix B

Examples (Kumai & Timson, 2003, pp.46-47)

Listen and repeat.

1. I'm glad you came.
2. There's a cat inside your bag.
3. Do as you like.
4. Has your brother come yet?

Listening for language

1. I couldn't catch it. _____ repeat it?
2. Leave me alone! _____ own business.
3. I _____ last night. But you weren't in, were you?
4. What _____ decide to come to Japan?
5. _____ bag? I can't see it.
6. _____ need any help, just give me a call.

7. It's not so difficult. Do _____ are told.
8. I'll _____ some money, just in case.
9. Calm down! _____ horses!
10. What happened? _____ scream.

Conversations in action

1. Alice: _____
_____ of chicken?
Ben: No, thanks. I'd like to leave room for dessert.
2. Cathy: Hi, Dave. _____?
Dave: Sure. What is it?
Cathy: I have a train to catch and I'm kind of running late.
_____ to the station?
Dave: Sure, hop in!