

# Effects of Form - Focused Instruction on the Acquisition of Weak Forms by Japanese EFL Learners

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学位授与年度	2015
学位授与番号	33912甲第7号
URL	<a href="http://doi.org/10.15012/00000613">http://doi.org/10.15012/00000613</a>

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学位の種類	博士(英語学)
学位記番号	甲第7号
学位授与年月日	2015年9月10日
学位授与の要件	学位規則第4条第1項該当(課程博士)
学位論文題目	Effects of Form - Focused Instruction on the Acquisition of Weak Forms by Japanese EFL Learners
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#### 審査結果の要旨

The thesis is concerned with examining the effectiveness of form-focused instruction (FFI) in the teaching of English weak forms for Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners and the pedagogical implications for the teaching of English pronunciation. This is a revised version of the thesis he submitted in December, 2014, and has been considerably improved from the previous one. FFI is one of the teaching methods which attracts the learners' interest to language forms and patterns in either implicit or explicit ways. It has been known since the mid-1990s and has been applied to the teaching of grammatical patterns and systems in EFL. Since the beginning of 2000s, however, there have been several attempts using FFI in teaching English pronunciation to Japanese students, and this thesis which has examined the application of FFI to the teaching of weak forms in English is a new addition to this research trend.

The thesis comprises five chapters, references and appendixes. Chapter 1 introduces the research and gives the scope of the thesis. Chapter 2 provides a comprehensive review of the literature relevant to FFI and weak forms in English, and presents several models of L2 speech perception and production. Chapter 3 describes the research setting, the participants, and the instructional design. Chapter 4 presents

the data, the statistical data, and a summary of findings in the experiments. Chapter 5 examines the findings in relation to the relevant fields of research and practice, and presents a conclusion.

In line with the above framework, the author sets up three research questions, mentioned below:

- 1) Does FFI, in which a teacher provides EI (explicit instruction) through phonetic negotiation of form, affect the interlanguage phonology of Japanese EFL learners?
- 2) Does the above-mentioned FFI have an effect on the receptive and/or productive acquisition of English weak vowel forms among Japanese EFL learners?
- 3) Is it appropriate to teach English weak vowel forms to EFL learners whose English proficiency is around level A, i.e. that of a Basic User, according to the CEFR(Common European Framework of Reference for Language)?

The author carried out the experiments in the classroom, and divided the participants in two groups, in which the one was an experimental group (EG, n=30) and the other a control group (CG, n=31). The students in EG attended two types of treatment (perception and production) and were given explicit phonetic characteristics of weak forms. On the other hand, CG followed a traditional forms-focused instruction in two treatments of perception and production. The author measured the knowledge of weak forms of the participants in the two groups in pre- and post-tests. He carried out the experiments designed for EG and CG for three weeks, and asserted that EG significantly outperformed the CG, especially in perception, and that the timely combination of FFI and communication-oriented instruction is more beneficial than the traditional approach in the teaching of weak forms in English.

#### Evaluation of the thesis

As mentioned, the thesis examines the effectiveness of FFI in the teaching of weak forms in EFL to Japanese learners of English. It is generally known that weak forms in English pronunciation pose problems for Japanese EFL learners, and the author's attempt was quite significant and challenging, since the application of FFI to the teaching of pronunciation has been scarce. The author provides the background of the research and presents a thorough literature review of FFI. The methods to carry out the experiments were relatively appropriate, and he demonstrates the knowledge and ability to carry out the experiments and to examine the results statistically. He terms his approach the phonetic negotiation of form.

In analyzing the data, he used the non-parametric methods, and presented the results in a succinct way. His statistical analysis was well grounded and was quite

convincing. He clearly showed that the participants in EG outperformed CG, especially in the perception of weak forms, and FFI was quite effective in teaching them. To answer his research questions, he concluded that FFI could enhance the effectiveness of L2 pronunciation teaching, explicit FFI could encourage EFL learners to notice features in the input, and Japanese EFL learners whose level is around CEFR A might not be able to master weak forms.

He has clearly shown that explicit and implicit FFI could play an important role in helping EFL learners develop their English pronunciation, but he also pointed out some limitations of his experiments. He mentioned the further needs to conduct a delayed post-test, to include a group with no instruction to compare with the EG and CG, and to investigate individual differences among learners.

As mentioned before, this is a revised thesis and this version has been well written and considerably improved from the previous one, but the committee found that some revisions of the thesis were needed. Although he mentioned that spectrographic analysis was undertaken, there was no data on acoustic aspects of weak forms. It is advisable to include some acoustic data to show how he and other examiners used them to verify the existence of weak forms in learners' utterances. Next, there is still a question of the validity of the experiment which was carried out in such a short period of three weeks. He recognizes that his experiment was small in scale, and therefore additional follow-up experiments are needed to verify the results in the near future. Lastly there are still some minor mistakes in grammatical usages of English, insufficient explanations of the data analysis in Chapter 4, and incorrect quotations from related materials. These should be taken into account, and more explanation need to be provided in revising the thesis. These remarks, however, do not detract from the value of the thesis.

From the above, the committee concludes that the Ph.D. thesis written and submitted by Hideki Abe can be accepted and doctoral degree can be awarded to author.