A BRIEF OUTLINE OF
Effects of form-focused instruction on the acquisition of weak forms by Japanese EFL learners

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The following is a brief outline of *Effects of form-focused instruction on the acquisition of weak forms by Japanese EFL learners,* my doctoral thesis submitted to Nagoya Gakuin University Graduate School in 2015. The outline is based on my previously published paper, 'Helping engineering-major learners learn foreign language pronunciation in the classroom' in *Transactions of ISATE 2015: The 9th International Symposium on Advances in Technology Education* (pp. 285-290), with minor revision and correction.

Keywords: *FFI, FonF, FonFs, pronunciation, second language (L2), weak forms*

Introduction

This research programme originates from approximately twenty years of experience in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to engineering-major students, and an ongoing interest in the effects of instruction on the development of second language (L2) pronunciation. The fundamental questions motivating the research reported here were (a) what should be taught at a specific stage of L2 development, and (b) how should languages be taught to facilitate more effective and efficient acquisition? (Muranoi, 1996)

The last two decades have witnessed a growing body of research on the effectiveness of L2 instruction from the perspective of Form-Focused Instruction (FFI) (De Graaff & Housen, 2009; Doughty, 2003; Ellis, 2008; Long & Robinson, 1998; Norris & Ortega, 2000). FFI is defined for the purposes of this thesis as 'any instructional activity which aims at drawing learners' attention to language form, where "form" stands for grammatical structures, lexical items, phonological features, and even sociolinguistic and pragmatic features of language' (De Graaff & Housen, 2009, p. 736). FFI has generally been categorized into two types, namely (a) *focus on forms* (plural; FonFs), involving explicit types of FFI, and (b) *focus on form* (singular; FonF), involving both implicit and explicit types of FFI. The distinction, *implicit* and *explicit* type of FFI, is demonstrated with several attributes in Housen and Pierrard (2005): Implicit FFI '*attracts* attention to target form, is delivered *spontaneously* (e.g. in an otherwise communication-oriented activity), is unobtrusive (minimal interruption of communication of meaning), presents target forms in context, makes no use of metalanguage, and encourages free use of target form' (p. 10, italics in the original), whilst Explicit FFI '*directs* attention to target forms, is *predetermined* and

planned (e.g. as the main focus and goal of a teaching activity), is obtrusive (interruption of communication of meaning), presents target forms in isolation, uses metalinguistic terminology (e.g. rule explanation), involves controlled practice of target form' (p. 10, italics in the original). Ongoing research has led to continuous modification of FFI, increasing its positive effects on L2 classroom instruction in the Japanese context and yielding strong support for the hypothesis that a timely combination of form-focused and communication-oriented instruction is necessary for successful L2 morphosyntactic development (Muranoi, 1996, 2006; Takashima, 2011).

L2 pronunciation studies in the 2000s shifted their interest to examining the assumption that FonF vigorously investigated in morphosyntactics might contribute to the betterment of L2 pronunciation (Couper, 2009; Chang, 2006; Park, 2000; Saito, 2011; Sicola, 2008; Yam, 2005). However, the FonF (singular) type of instruction has not always and completely outperform FonFs (plural), in which sequenced and fragmented items are presented to the learners stepwise, in the hope that the learners will acquire the system of the target language with the passage of time. Further investigation is thus required to answer the question, *Is FFI appropriate to promote the acquisition of L2 pronunciation in the classroom?* At present, this line of inquiry has just started. The study aims to address three main research questions:

(1) Does FFI, in which a teacher provides explicit instruction through phonetic negotiation of form, affect the interlanguage pronunciation of Japanese EFL students?

(2) Does the above-mentioned FFI have an effect on the receptive and/or productive acquisition of English weak forms among Japanese EFL students?

(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 *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR)?

Background to Form-Focused Instruction in SLA

FFI is adopted as a framework for the present study, and can be best understood against the background of historical developments in second and foreign language pedagogy. Throughout attempts to reform classroom language teaching that followed the Reform Movement

of the late 19th century, L2 classroom research has developed three general approaches to instruction, namely *focus on meaning* (FonM), FonF, and FonFs. (Doughty, 2003, p. 267). Recent meta-analysis of classroom instruction in second language acquisition (SLA) has attempted to determine not only its overall effectiveness but also the relative effectiveness of different types of instruction. According to Norris and Ortega (2000), who examined 250 studies of instructed SLA published from 1980 to 1998, the most effective approach was explicit FonF, with a large effect size; it was followed by explicit FonFs, implicit FonF, and finally implicit FonFs. Although 'instructional contexts, number and characteristics of participants, and amount and intensity of instruction, [are] all factors potentially contributing to heterogeneity in observed instructional effectiveness' (Norris & Ortega, 2000, p. 501), the general tendency in previous research shows that FonF is most likely to yield the greatest benefit in L2 instruction

Despite the acknowledged benefits of FFI demonstrated by SLA research in the past decade, the question regarding the adequacy of FFI remains. As noted by Tragant & Munoz (2004), for instance, 'an important issue in relation to the benefits of instruction is whether all learners can equally benefit from it' (p. 212). The question relates to the case in which, despite the significant role of output-promoting tasks in the SLA process, a basic-level learner often fails to notice the mismatch between the interlanguage and the target form, and hence fails in that particular aspect of SLA. According to a recent official survey by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT), the EFL competence of high school seniors in Japan across the four skill components places approximately 10% of them at the B1 or B2 level, with the majority (90%) at the A1 level. Some proponents of FFI posit that the optimal level for FFI might be the CEFR B1 or B2 (de Graaff & Housen, 2009, p. 279). If this assumption is correct, the level of Japanese secondary school students may not be adequate for effective FFI.

To overcome this problem, Takashima (2011) proposed a *FonF Approach* by which basic-level learners can process the input by negotiating the target form and receiving explicit feedback, with activities facilitating the noticing and processing mechanism. Muranoi (2006, pp. 18-23) suggests that Explicit and Implicit FFI, i.e. *PCPP* in his term, can activate the cognitive L2 learning process, by presenting target form(s) in contexts, followed by such practice as *contextualized drill* and *meaningful pattern practice*, then, production or post-comprehension activities like *dictoglos*, *presentation* and so forth. Unfortunately, L2 pronunciation instruction has not kept pace with the development of FFI, although such an approach might help learners with their EFL pronunciation.

Weak Forms in L2 Pronunciation Pedagogy

Until fairly recently, with the publication of Jenkins (2000), only a few researchers seemed to question the high priority placed on native-speech-based models, such as Received Pronunciation (RP) or General American (GA), in teaching L2 pronunciation. More precisely, EFL teaching has gradually shifted its emphasis from a native-speech-oriented model to an intelligibility-oriented model in the 1970s. However, the proponents of the traditional model still claim the significance of learning native-like weak forms, as they are by far the most frequent among the 20 vowels and 24 consonants in English, and are one of the prime features of the language (Gimson, 1980, p. 309). Meanwhile, in recent literature on English as an international language (EIL), it has been shown that weak forms (reduced vowels) are not considered to be important segments by international non-native and native interlocutors. Jenkins (2000) excluded weak forms from her *Lingua Franca Core* (LFC; a phonological syllabus designed specifically for L2 learners of English, to be used by and with non-L1 English speakers). The LFC is intended to include the phonological features crucial for mutual intelligibility among EFL speakers, so the omission of weak forms is notable in this context. At the same time, careful reading of Jenkins (2000) also reveals that she did admit the use of weak forms in the LFC, albeit in a limited sense: 'those learners will still need to work on weak forms (in the traditional sense) *receptively* in the classroom' (p. 148, italics in the original).

It is also well known that the acquisition of English weak forms poses ongoing difficulties for non-native speakers in perception and production (Gimson, 1980; Kohmoto, 1982; Rojczyk & Porzuczek, 2012). This has motivated many researchers to investigate the effects and effectiveness of teaching weak forms in the formal setting (Gómez Lacabex, García Lecumberri & Cooke, 2009; Porzuczek, 2010 among others). Nevertheless, there is thus far a paucity of research devoted to the question of the teachability and learnability of weak forms amongst adolescent learners in the EFL classroom.

The findings suggest that secondary school learners may be able to perceive weak forms after instruction, but their production ability shows little improvement. An intervention study by Gomez Lacabex et al. (2009) investigated the receptive abilities of 41 teenagers (mean age 15.8 years) who received 12 sessions of either perception training (Group A), productive training (Group B), or no training (control group) over a period of three months. The results indicated that both types of training (i.e. perception and production) led to significant improvement after instruction. However, Gomez Lacabex and Garcia Lecumberri (2010) showed only a moderate effect of instruction on the production of 34 teenage learners after three weekly sessions of 30 minute each. A similar result is reported by Gutierrez and Monroy (2003), cited in Gomez Lacabex et al.

(2009), indicating that the effect of instruction on teens' productive abilities was limited. Furthermore, at a secondary school in Poland, Bogacka, Scwartz, Zydorowicz, Polezynska-Fiser, & Orzechowska (2006), cited in Rojczyk and Porzuczek (2012), suggested that L1 influence remained evident in the production data of adolescent learners. The current literature appears to lack such a classroom-based analysis of the effects of various types of instruction on phonological forms such as English weak forms among adolescent learners of EFL.

Current Study

Research setting and participants. This study was conducted during a regularly scheduled class taught by the author at a college located in northern Japan. Most of the students in the class come from the same prefecture where the college is located, which implies that they are relatively similar in terms of their background, goals in learning English, level of English proficiency, and engagement in the subject. The number of participants was 30 in the experimental group (EG) and 31 in the control group (CG).

Treatment. The EG and the CG participated in a quasi-experiment focused on both perception and production, in which two classes were devoted to perception instruction and production instruction, respectively. The classroom experiment was conducted over a period of three weeks and consisted of a pre-test, treatment sessions, and a post-test. The pre-test took place in week 1, prior to the perception and production treatment sessions, which consisted of four class hours in week 1 and 2, in both groups. Then, in week 3, the participants took the post-test.

The instruction for the EG. The perception instruction for the EG followed both explicit and implicit FFI, encouraging learners to observe a certain target feature and discover the underlying rule on their own initiative. Note that the instruction for the EG had dual characteristics of FonF (implicit FFI) and FonFs (explicit FFI), which was deliberate, as Muranoi (2006) and Takashima (2011) contend that FFI in secondary schools, or among basic-level learners, should be integrated and enhanced with explicit and implicit FFI activities. In the production classes, the instruction of the EG shifted to implicit FFI, based on the premise that not only input-based but also output-promoting tasks play a critical role in L2 learning experiences. Corrective feedback and free production activities resulting in output of the target forms during such instruction can enable learners to modify their knowledge in meaningful communicative activities.

> Student: *I' m good* [a]*t playing baseball.*
> Teacher: *Good* [a]*t? Now, listen. Yours, good* [a]*t.*
> *Normally, good* [ə]*t. Can you see the difference?*
> Student : *I'm good* [a~ə] *t.*

In this way, it was assumed that *phonetic negotiation of form*, corrective feedback, would help participants to discover rules governing the use of weak forms or to gain declarative knowledge of weak forms more successfully than would merely presenting the target forms with an explicit explanation.

The instruction for the CG. The perception classes, like those for the EG, were devoted to explicitly presenting the target forms in context, as well as asking participants to identify the target forms in prepared dialogues, with the aim of helping them to comprehend the target weak forms. Unlike the EG, the production sessions for the CG used explicit FFI (FonFs). In so doing, the author played a crucial role in explicitly informing participants of the rules underlying the target prosodic features. This helped them to gain declarative knowledge of weak forms by means of FonFs instruction. This entails a synthetic approach (Wilkins, 1976), in which sequenced and fragmented items are presented to learners in a stepwise manner. The lesson ended with a pair reading-aloud activity in which the participants were asked to pay particular attention to what they had learned in order to reflect it in their reading.

Assessment. The evaluation instrument used to assess the participants' pre- and post-treatment performance was divided into four subtests: two for perception and two for production. The perception test consisted of 10 sound discrimination and 20 dictation tests, thus the full mark was 30 points. The production test consisted of recording of two subtests: reading a passage and a picture description task. The samples were digitally recorded and saved as an audio file on a PC computer at 22 kHz with 16-bit resolution using Olympus Sonority Plus for Editors, LS-11. The data collected from the pre- and post-tests of production were analysed by two American native speaker teachers, both of whom were EFL experts, and the author. Each examiner had 10 points to award, which were given in accordance with the subjects' performance: five points for the reading task and five points for the picture description task. Thus, the full score of each participant was a total of the three examiners' scores, 30 points.

Inter-rater reliability was measured, and was $\alpha=0.72$ for the pre-test and $\alpha=0.74$ for the post-test, which is acceptable in the context of statistical analysis. For cases in which auditory analysis was insufficient for the examiners to be sure of the quality of schwa, spectrographic analysis was undertaken by means of *Praat,* the computer program developed by Boersma & Weenink (2011). Questions among examiners were thus resolved by resorting to acoustic analysis.

Results

The data demonstrated a significant change in the total (perception and production) scores: though the difference was not significant at the pre-test, it turned out to be significant at the post-test. A student's t-test was performed in order to compare the pre-test scores of the EG and the CG in the pre-test phase. The result indicated no significant difference between the two groups for the total pre-test scores in perception, in production and, most importantly, for the total scores of

perception and production (no effect size: *Cohen's d*=0). The between-group comparisons for the integrated ability reveal a significant main effect of instruction with a large effect size in the total score (*d*=1.00); in perception, the EG significantly outperformed the CG with a large effect size (*d*=0.94); and in production, the EG did significantly better than the CG with a medium effect size (*d*=0.62) at post-test stage, as shown in Figures 1 and 2 and Table 1, in which the abbreviations in this table, and hereafter, PRE, POST, PC, and PD stand for pre-test, post-test, perception, and production respectively. The values, e.g. ±1.92, denote *Standard Deviation (SD)*.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of Total Scores in Pre- and Post-test of Perception and Production of Weak Forms

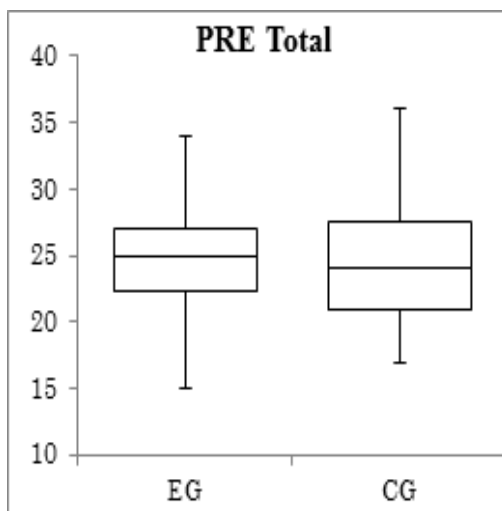|	Test Score	EG (n=30) *M*	CG (n=31) *M*	*p-value*
PRE	PC	11.57 ±1.92	11.55 ±2.20	0.97
	PD	13.27±3.19	13.26±4.27	0.99
	Total	24.84±4.04	24.81±4.72	0.98
POST	PC	16.20±2.82	14.52±2.66	0.02
	PD	13.3±1.47	11.97±1.64	0.0014
	Total	29.5±3.42	26.48±3.12	p<0.001

Figure 1
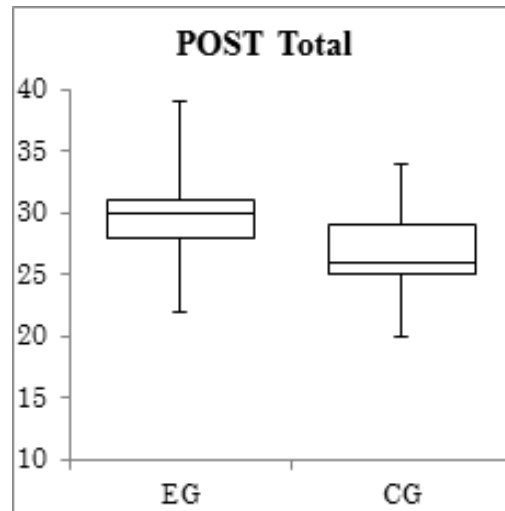The distribution of the total scores of the EG and the CG at pre-test stage

Figure 2
The distribution of the total scores of the EG and the CG at post-test stage

The between-group comparisons for respective ability at the post-test phase also reveal a significant main effect of instruction with a large effect size in the total score. In perception, the EG outperformed the CG with a medium effect size, which does not completely reach the significant level of p<0.017 due to the Bonferroni correction, and in production, the EG significantly outperformed the CG with a large effect size. The Wald test below is an examination of the difference in the total scores of the EG and the CG, which demonstrates the significance of the difference where the EG outperformed the CG at the post-test phase. The Wald test also shows that the difference in the development of perception reached the significant level, whilst the development in production was quite limited.

Table 2
Result of Wald Test in the Difference of Perception and Production

	Coefficient Estimate	95% CI Lower	Upper	*p-value*
PC	1.67	0.041	3.290	0.05
PD	1.32	-0.367	3.014	0.18
Total	2.99	0.971	5.007	0.0052

The between-test data in Table 3 demonstrate that there was a significant difference in the perception and production scores, with a large effect size in the EG, a medium effect size in the CG, represented *r* here. There was also a significant difference in the perception data, again with a large effect size in the EG, as well as in the CG. However, no significant change was found in the production data, with no effect size in the EG, and in the CG.

Table 3
Result of the Wilcoxon Test on the Development of the EG and the CG

		M	p-value	r
PC	EG	4.63 ±3.43	p< 0.001	0.81
	CG	2.97 ±3.04	p< 0.001	0.71
PD	EG	0.03 ±2.43	0.935	0.02
	CG	1.29 ±4.08	0.20	0.31
Total	EG	4.67 ±4.25	p< 0.001	0.75
	CG	1.68 ±3.79	0.02597	0.41

Discussion and Conclusion

Until quite recently, L2 pronunciation studies in FFI have yielded mixed results: unlike in the acquisition of L2 morphosyntax, FoFs could also contribute non-trivially to the successful acquisition of a specific form in pronunciation. The present data demonstrated a significant change in the total (perception and production) scores: though the difference was not significant at the pre-test phase, it turned out to be significant at the post-test stage. These data naturally suggest that the EG outperformed the CG in the output performance at the post-test. Accordingly, the data also display noticeable development of both the EG and the CG in terms of the accuracy of the learners' performance in several receptive and productive tasks, demonstrating that the FonFs type of instruction contributed moderately to the development of L2 pronunciation.

However, the fact that the EG significantly outperformed the CG can be attributed to the cognitively more challenging FonF tasks the EG engaged in. The CG was instructed using a familiar passage in the perception practice, and its production training was not as challenging as in the EG treatment, in which perception (input) and production (output) practice required concentration on the target form but helped with corrective feedback. Therefore, the findings contribute to solving a currently contentious question in instructed SLA of speech: whether FFI approach can significantly facilitate the development of L2 pronunciation. It can be suggested that for L2 pronunciation, FFI could be the best possible option in the EFL classroom, and that, more importantly, FonF could make a more significant change.

Nonetheless, the production ability of the learners was quite limited. The data gathered by the present study might suggest that the cognitive and linguistic competence of Japanese adolescent learners, whose English level is generally around CEFR A, might not yet be ready to the learning of L2 weak forms production from the developmental perspective; that

is, it is not simply that they had had insufficient time and effort to practice the weak forms. To examine this issue, an acoustic analysis of the weak and full vowels of a randomly selected 20 participants was conducted (n=10 from the EG and CG respectively), since 'The phenomenon of vowel reduction in unstressed syllables appears to be composed of both durational and qualitative factors that cooperate in signalling unstressed vowels.' (Rojczyk and Porzuczek, 2012: p. 210). The participants' data were compared with that of the instructor, who is at approximately advanced level, at the post-test stage, to investigate *duration* of a vowel, one of the phonetic signals of weak forms, in which, according to Rojczyk and Porzuczek (2012), who extensively reviewed the past 50 years of L2 vowel reduction research, 'unstressed vowels were roughly half the duration of the stressed vowel…' (p. 210). As in Table 4, the duration of participants' EG and CG varied in the range of 70 ms and 250 ms for both weak and full (stressed) vowels, which did not indicate a marked difference between weak and full stressed vowels. In other words, while the instructor exhibited approximately half duration for the full vowel, for instance, 68 ms in weak forms and 135 ms in full vowels in Reading, and 30 ms in weak forms and 80 ms in full vowels in Dialogue, the participants in the EG and CG rarely demonstrated the weak and full vowel contrast in production either during the post-test, or the pre-test, although the between-group comparisons for weak forms in the post-test, deploying a Mann-Whitney test, at least revealed a significant main effect of instruction with a large effect size at the level of $p<.049$, $r=.62$ in the Reading and $p<.03$, $r=.68$ in the Dialogue.

Table 4
Mean Duration of Weak Forms and Full Vowels of the EG and the CG

	PRE		POST	
	Weak	Full	Weak	Full
Reading EG	111	140	130	160
CG	130	160	171	180
Instructor			68	135
P	0.17	0.7	0.049	0.186
Dialogue EG	120	130	154	70
CG	130	120	250	110
Instructor			30	80
P	0.57	0.34	0.03	0.006

The insufficient attainment in production might be due to the degree of difficulty according to the type of weak form vowel. After an investigation of their research on connected speech modifications in English, i.e. *linking*, *flapping*, *vowel reduction* and *consonant cluster simplification*, Anderson-Hsieh, Riney, and Koehler (1994) reported that 'An analysis of the forms used by the HP and IP groups showed that both groups reduced their vowels mainly in the definite and indefinite articles. They rarely reduced vowels in words such as *you* or *to* or in unstressed syllables in words

such as *request*. This failure to reduce vowels may arise at least in part from native language transfer, since Japanese vowels retain their pure quality and are never centralized as they are in English' (pp. 45-46), where HP and IP stand for high-proficiency and intermediate-proficiency respectively.

There remain several important limitations to this thesis that should be mentioned: (1) the need to conduct a delayed post-test, (2) the need to include a group with no instruction to compare with the EG and CG, and (3) the need to investigate individual differences among learners. Despite the limitations, helping learners discover rules or declarative knowledge of vowel reduction in FonF would be more successful than merely presenting the target form in FonFs, even with explicit explanation. The present author hopes that the findings of this study, demonstrating that carefully designed pronunciation instruction can help learners improve their performance, would motivate future attempts to teach foreign language pronunciation in the EFL classroom.

Meanwhile, despite the acknowledged benefits of FFI demonstrated by L2 research in the past decade, the cognitive and interactional model of L2 acquisition, upon which FFI is based, assumes that learners are willing to engage in communicative activities and that, in so doing, teachers encourage them to accelerate the acquisition process, which is not always the case. We often observe in the classroom that some learners risked losing communicative competence because of L2 anxiety or worry, for instance, by thinking '*I might lose face when I make a mistake in the class*', and thus barely moving beyond a rudimentary communication level (Abe, forthcoming). Thus, it seems pertinent to suggest that the attainment of L2 pronunciation in FFI might be affected by learner variables, which have unfortunately been neglected in the mainstream FFI and L2 pronunciation research until now. This will help us develop pedagogical intervention for FFI, so that more learners could actively get involved in the output-promoting task and thus achieve higher attainment in EFL pronunciation.

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