Usage-based Construal Awareness: The learning of typologically different second language grammar

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Previous studies have shown persistent transfer of the first-language Japanese topic–comment structure into the second-language English subject–predicate structure (e.g., ”*Parties hate” rather than ”I hate parties”). According to Japanese–English contrastive studies in cognitive linguistics (CL), the typological difference reflects a construal difference, situation versus person focus (Hinds, 1986). This paper examines effects of raising awareness of how events are construed in the target language on the learning of the English subject–predicate. Fifty-eight Japanese undergraduates met individually with the researcher for three sessions: pretest, treatment, and posttest activities. They orally expressed their opinions about a given theme in the pre- and posttests. In the treatment, 20 participants (Communicative Construal-Awareness [CA] Group) reformulated their opinions as intended in the pretest with the help of the CL image schema that represents the English person focus. Other 19 participants (Communicative Group) engaged in the same reformulation prompted by the researcher’s recast without CA raising. The remaining 19 participants (Non-Communicative CA Group) engaged in production practice with the image schema, but the exemplars used in the practice were irrelevant to their opinions. Pretest–posttest change was analyzed in terms of the proportion of the correct subject–predicate structure by repeated-measures analyses of variance. Communicative CA and Communicative Groups improved more markedly than Non-Communicative CA Group, and Communicative CA Group outperformed Communicative Group in the posttest. Furthermore, the degree of dependence on instances experienced in the Communicative CA and Communicative treatments was measured along the memorized–creative (3 points–zero) continuum for the posttest correct production and compared between the two groups by the t-test. No significant difference was found, and the post-production by the two communicative groups was mostly based on the treatment-derived items. These results suggest that CA in communicative contexts may facilitate usage-based learning, not sudden abstraction.

Keywords: cognitive linguistics, typological transfer, usage-based learning, construal awareness.