Effects of form-focused instruction on EFL speaking development– Changes in syntactic accuracy over time

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This study examined the effects of form-focused instruction on EFL speaking development, especially syntactic accuracy over time. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been an effective approach for developing English communicative ability. However, syntactic accuracy in speaking can be improved remains a challenge for many EFL learners and teachers. Three first-year Japanese university students participated in this small-scale classroom based study for seven weeks. Pretest and posttest were conducted one week before and one week after the seven-week intervention period. During intervention, all participants narrated a different four-picture cartoon each week (with equivalent difficulty). Narrations produced by participants were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. Results indicate that not all three participants improve in syntactic accuracy in terms with the percentage of error-free T-units and the percentage of accurate past tense verb usage. Nevertheless, their week to week trajectory changes were qualitatively examined and presented. This study concludes with some possible pedagogical implications for integrating focus-on-forms into TBLT classrooms.

本研究は文法の正確さの発達にフォーム・フォーカスト・インストラクションがもたらす効果について縦断的に調査を行った。タスクベースの教授法（TBLT）は英語コミュニケーション能力を向上させるアプローチである。しかし、文法の正確さをどのように改善できるか、今だに大きな課題として考えられている。本研究では、日本の大学1年生3名が教室内で7週間の研究に参加した。参加者が毎週異なる（同等の難しさ）4コマ漫画をナレーションした。また、7週間の介入期間の前の週にプレテスト、翌週にポストテストを実施した。録音及び転写されたナレーションの分析を行った。結果として、3 人の参加者のグローバルとローカルの文法の正確さが向上したことを明らかにした。本研究の結果をもとに、参加者の週ごとの文法の変化を量的に分析し、考察を行った。本研究は、フォーカス・オン・フォームズをTBLTに導入する可能性が示唆された。

1. Introduction

Developing speaking proficiency is one of the biggest challenges for EFL learners. Even learners with high English proficiency may struggle with speaking as they have limited opportunities to speak the target language outside the classroom. As an attempt to develop students' English speaking proficiency, many EFL classrooms have implemented the communicative language teaching approach (Nunan, 2003; Takanashi, 2004). Within communicative language teaching, task-based language teaching (TBLT) has become a popular approach in the past several decades as it offers learners the opportunity to speak in the target language by doing tasks that replicate real-life situations (Ellis, 2003, 2018; Long, 2015; Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). However, research has shown that while learners become more fluent from engaging in different meaningful tasks, they continue to make grammatical errors. Therefore, earlier task-based language teaching approach (e.g., Long, 1991) was sometimes criticized for overemphasizing meaning-focused tasks while overlooking attention to form. Nevertheless, task-based language teaching has since recognized the importance of integrating form into meaningful tasks (Long, 2015). However, while the integration of 'form' in TBLT has been recognized, there are still few studies looking at the effects of form-focused instruction on speaking development over time. Therefore, this research aims to examine the longer-term effects of task repetition on speaking development by looking at changes in the grammatical accuracy of three EFL learners in Japan. Data for this study was collected during the author's doctoral dissertation research.

2. Background

2.1 *Effects of Form-Focused Instruction*

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has recognized the importance of integrating form-focused instruction into meaningful tasks for developing students' speaking proficiency (Long, 2015). Form-focused instruction (FFI) includes both incidental and strategically organized instruction that directs learners' attention to target language linguistic forms. The definition of form-focused instruction therefore varies, ranging from implicit instructions such as task repetition, to more explicit instructions such as demonstration, explanation and feedback of target forms by teachers (Norris & Ortega, 2000).

Past studies on the effects of form-focused instruction on L2 speaking development have often centered on the role of repetition (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Lambert et al., 2017). Repetition leads to automation of speech, which in turn improves fluency. On the other hand, repetition does not only improve fluency, it also increases complexity as learners can better conceptualize the task (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Skehan, 2009).

Repetition reduces learners' processing load for conceptualization, which frees up their working memory capacity (Levelt, 1989). Through familiarization with the task content when the same task is repeated, learners can then focus attention on linguistic form (Fukuta, 2016). The freed up working memory capacity is thought to lead to more automatized speech (Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Ellis, 2005) which improves fluency (Bygate, 2001). Past studies have found that task repetition improves fluency (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Ellis, 2005). In addition, many of these studies were conducted cross-sectionally so the researchers were only able to confirm the shorter-term effects of task repetition on speaking (see Kanda, 2015 as an exception). For example, Lambert et al. (2017) conducted a study examining the effects of task repetition on speaking fluency over six performances within one single session. They found that largest speech rate gains occurred in the first three repetitions. In addition, the number of self-repairs decreased in the fifth and six repetition. These two changes showed that fluency possibly increased from the effects of repetition. However, although gains in speaking fluency were significant after six repetitions, the research was conducted within one 90-minute session.

Some studies found positive effects of repetition on the development of complexity in speaking (Bygate, 2001; Gass et al., 1999; Skehan, 2009). They suggested that improved complexity presumably occurred because learners could recycle some of the cognitive work performed in the area of morphosyntax in subsequent performances and thus freed up their working memory. This increased working memory capacity possibly allows learners to focus more on complex syntactic structures.

In contrast to many reported positive effects on fluency and some positive effects on complexity, only a few studies on the effects of task repetition have found gains in syntactic accuracy (Fukuta, 2016; Gass et al., 1999; Kanda, 2015; Sangarun, 2005). The insignificant accuracy gains were probably due to learners primarily focusing their attention on formulating and processing content so they were possibly able to produce more accurate linguistic forms.

2.2 *Measurement of L2 Speaking Proficiency*

Different definitions of speaking proficiency have led to different measurements of speaking proficiency (Ellis, 2009; Housen & Kuiken, 2009; Housen et al., 2012; Iwashita, 2010). Consequently, different measurements have produced different controversial results in the development of L2 speaking proficiency (Nitta & Nakatsuhara, 2014). From a linguistic perspective, speaking proficiency is often measured in terms of three constructs: complexity, accuracy, and fluency (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005; Norris & Ortega, 2009).

While there are different measurements of speaking proficiency, it has been agreed that speaking performances need to be measured using multiple constructs to precisely and objectively understand oral proficiency (Norris & Ortega, 2009). Studies that used single construct measurements produced more positive results from the effects of intervention than studies that used multi-construct measurements (Bygate, 1996). In particular, studies that measured only the fluency aspect of speaking proficiency have produced predominantly positive results (e.g., Bygate, 2001; Ellis, 2005). In addition, studies that measured the complexity aspect of speaking have produced both positive and negative results (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2006). However, up to date, only a small number of studies have produced positive results in the speaking accuracy (See Gass et al., 1999 and Sangarun, 2005 for some exceptions).

2.3 *Measurement of Grammatical Accuracy Development*

Grammatical accuracy, also known as syntactic accuracy can be measured in terms of global (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Iwashita et al., 2008) and local accuracy of specific linguistic forms (Iwashita et al., 2008; Ortega, 1999). Global accuracy, often measured by percentage of error-free T-units or percentage of error-free clauses is often considered to be the most comprehensive accuracy measure because all errors are considered (Michel, 2017). The percentage of error free T-units indicates T-units without grammatical errors including both specific errors (e.g., inaccurate simple past tense) and other linguistic errors such as word order errors, morphological errors, and the omission of pronouns (Iwashita et al., 2008). While global accuracy is a holistic measure that tries to include all deviations from the target linguistic forms, it is not sensitive enough to capture all features nor minor changes in development (Lambert & Kormos, 2014). On the other hand, analyses of local errors have been conducted on features such as verb tenses, third person singular usage, plural markers, prepositions, and articles (Wigglesworth, 1997). The choice for a local accuracy measure is based on the focus of the intervention, for example, when investigating the effects of teaching past tense usage to learners, past simple tense -ed can be chosen as the target of analysis (Michel, 2017). However, while local error analysis can offer a detailed description of the target erroneous forms, they cannot represent learners' holistic accuracy performance (Iwashita et al., 2008). In addition, results of the local accuracy analyses might be too specific to be applied to other contexts (Michel, 2017). Therefore, it is important to integrate both global and local measurements when measuring learners' syntactic accuracy development.

However, past studies of speaking proficiency development have lacked evidence of accuracy gains. One reason suggested is that due to the difficult nature of collecting, transcribing, and analyzing spoken data, past studies only looked at the effects of intervention from one single occasion, and were unable to measure the effects of intervention longitudinally. Therefore, while past studies looking at the effects of repetition did not produce positive grammatical accuracy gains, it is unknown if gains in grammatical accuracy can be made if interventions are expanded over longer periods of time. Therefore, the present study examined changes in learners' speaking accuracy from the effects of task repetition over seven weeks, by quantitatively and qualitatively analyzing global and local errors produced by learners. The following two research questions were investigated in this study:

RQ1: Did learners improve in syntactic accuracy over time from task repetition?
RQ2: How did learners change in syntactic accuracy week-by-week over time?

3. Methods

3.1 *Research Environment*

The study was conducted during normal class hours at a Japanese national university where students had few opportunities to speak English outside of class. Students at the university are considered to have high academic ability and have intermediate to advanced English reading and listening skills with a mean TOEFL-PBT score of 500. All students at this university are required to enroll in two 90-minute English courses per week in the first and second year. Some courses are taught by English native teachers and some courses are taught by Japanese teachers. Some courses require students to speak only in English during class.

3.2 *Participants*

Participants of this study came from a first-year course taught by the researcher. Focus-on-forms was not a part of the course and the researcher did not explicitly teach grammatical forms in class. Participants were three average achievers chosen from a class of 25 Japanese university students. They were selected based on their speaking performance in class. By doing so, this study could possibly exclude potential issues with outliers as highly and lowly achieving learners are likely to develop their speaking proficiency differently from average achievers. Participants consisted of Yuka, Yuu, and Yusuke (Pseudonyms). Yuka was the weakest English speaker out of the three participants and produced mostly short sentences prior to the start of the study. Yusuke was the most talkative speaker and produced the largest amount of content in his narrations.

3.3 *Procedures*

To measure changes in syntactic accuracy over time from the effects of task repetition, the three

participants narrated a different Eiken Pre-level 1 four-picture cartoon (different content but same difficulty level) once a week for seven weeks. Every week, participants narrated the same four-picture cartoon for that week in English and recorded themselves on a computer during class time (all participants narrated a total of seven cartoons in the same order). The cartoons were adapted from a commercial textbook (Akao, 2011). All seven cartoons were piloted in a previous study to ensure they have equivalent difficulty level. The participants were instructed to speak as much as possible during the narration time (maximum two minutes). Pretest and posttest were conducted one week before and one week after seven consecutive weeks of interventions. The same four-picture cartoon (eighth cartoon) was used for both pretest and posttest narration. Participants narrated the same content cartoon for pretest and posttest. The recordings were orthographically transcribed, pruned where content related to the narration were deleted (for example, thank you for listening), and then analyzed by the researcher.

4. Results

4.1 *Changes in the Percentage of Error-Free T-Units*

Figure 1 shows a few trends in the percentage of error-free T-units produced by participants. First, from Pretest to Week 1, all three participants decreased rapidly in the percentage of error-free T-units, within which Yusuke produced no error-free T-unit in Week 1. Second, from Week 1 to Week 2, everyone increased in the percentage of error-free T-units. Third, all three participants fluctuated in their percentage of error-free T-units throughout the study. Finally, comparing posttest to pretest, Yuka increased, Yuu decreased, and Yusuke made no change in the percentage of error-free T-units. In Week 1, Yuka decreased about 50% in error-free T-units compared to Pretest, Yuu decreased about 20%, and Yusuke decreased 100%. In Week 2, Yuka produced 40% error-free T-units, which was two times more than what she produced in Week 1.

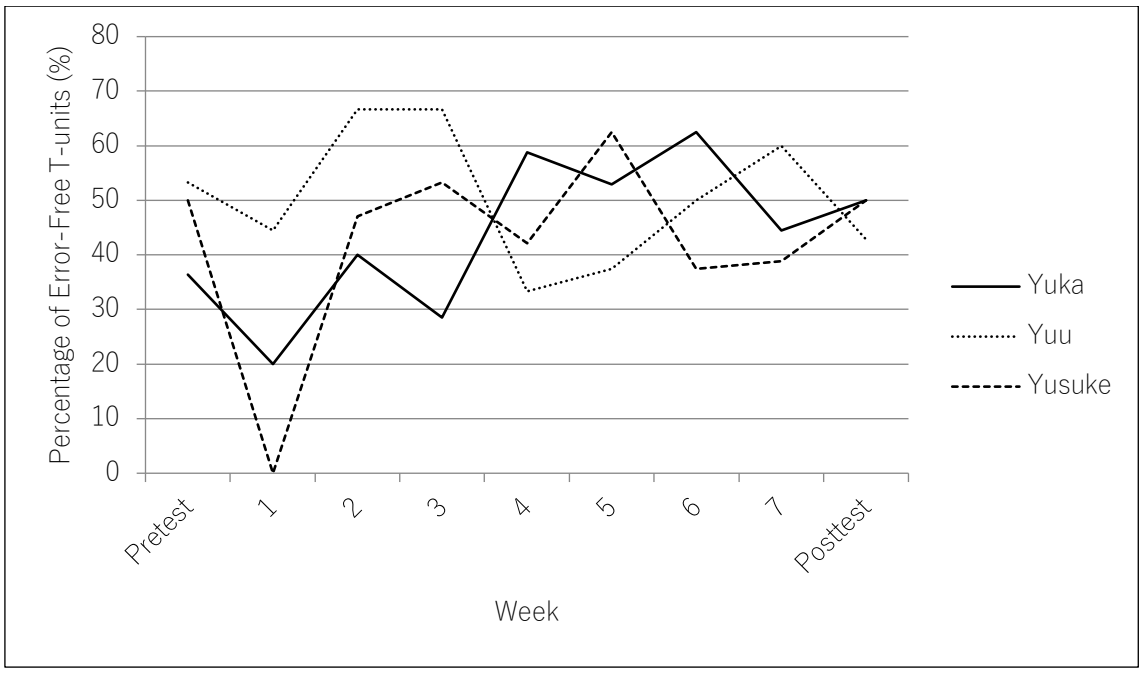

Figure 1. Weekly changes in the percentage of error-free T-units

4.2 *Changes in the Percentage of Accurate Past Tense Usage*

Figure 2 shows changes in the percentage of accurate past tense usage produced by the three participants. Overall, there were fluctuations throughout the weeks but the biggest decrease also happened between Pretest and Week 1. In Week 1, the largest decreases were made by Yusuke, he produced almost half the percentage of accurate past tense compared to what he produced in the Pretest. In Week 2, all participants increased significantly in percentage of accurate past tense.

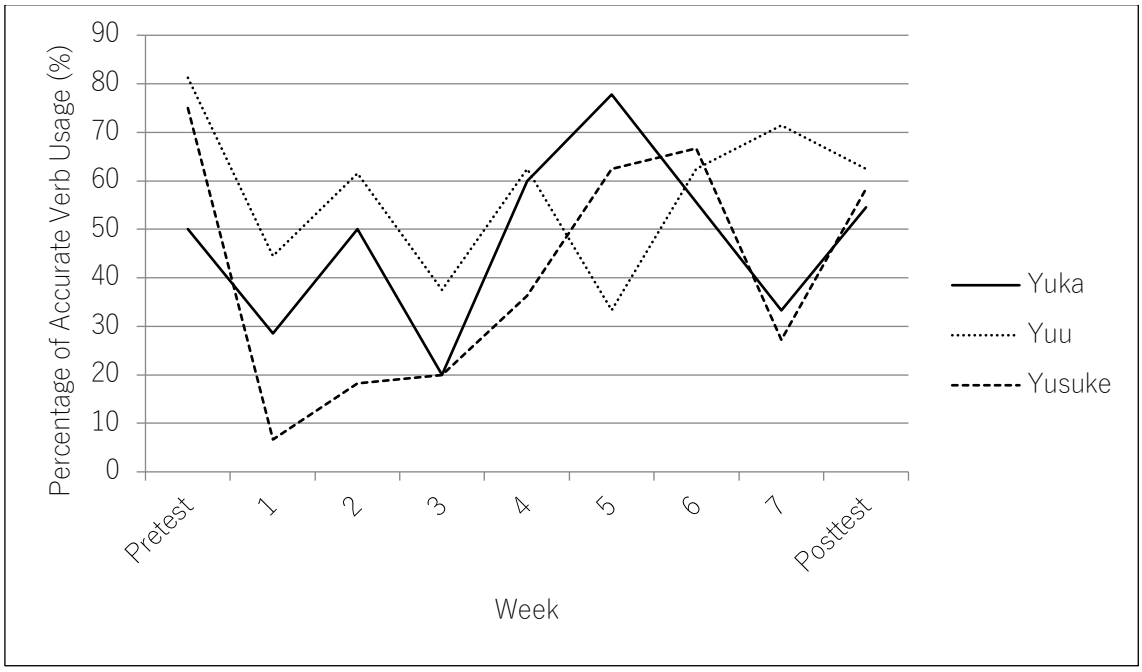

Figure 2. Weekly changes in the percentage of accurate past tense usage

4.3 *Week-to-Week Changes in Individual Participants*

This section qualitatively describes changes in the three participants over nine weeks. Self-repairs such as redundant repetitions, self-corrections, false starts, and reconstructions are placed into {…}. False started words are coded with an em dash, (—).

In Pretest, Yuka had no consistency in her choice of verb tense as she narrated the cartoon using a mixture of past and present tense forms, roughly half and half. She continued to make errors in her use of *be* verbs. For example, in Week 3, she said "The room is very small and the room is full with many things," instead of, "The room was very small and the room was full with many things" to describe something that happened in the past. In Week 4, Yuka increased the percentage of accurate past tense use as she accurately self-corrected some past tense verb forms. For example, she said, "And she {said that} {she talk} talked her frighten things." Yuka self-corrected erroneous simple present tense, *talk*, into the accurate simple past form, *talked*. She also continued to use *can* in its present tense form instead of *could* (past tense of can), for example in Week 5, Yuka said, "So, he cannot spend time with his family," and, "A few days later, he can't stand that situation."

In Yuu's case, he continued to make grammatical errors throughout Week 1 to Week 7. Throughout his narrations, Yuu used mostly simple past tense in his narrations, sometimes past continuous tense but never past perfect tense. Most of Yuu's past continuous tense usage was inaccurate. Among the three participants, he produced the highest percentage of accurate past simple tense in Pretest. After Pretest, his performance decreased steadily as the weeks progressed and then increased again towards the end of the intervention period. Looking closely into Yuu's changes in tense usage, Yuu started with approximately 80% accurate past simple tense usage in Pretest. In Week 1, he produced nine simple past forms but five were inaccurate. Yuu started to self-correct his erroneous past tense usage, for example, he said, "{they shows} they watched the notice board." In addition, Yuu also sometimes self-corrected accurate verb usages to erroneous usages. For example, in Week 1, he said, "{a woman suggested} and then a woman suggest." Between Week 3 and 5, Yuu's percentage of accurate past tense verbs continued to largely fluctuate. In Week 5, Yuu produced only one accurate past tense verb, "Everyone agreed his idea." In Week 7, Yuu produced five past continuous forms, but four of them were inaccurate. In addition, he self-corrected an originally accurate verb to an inaccurate verb; he narrated, "When {his mother} his mother bring— brong juices and cookies for them, she asked them to play outside because it is sunny that day."

Overall, Yusuke used less complex and shorter sentences compared to Yuka and Yuu. Among the action verbs he used throughout the nine weeks, he used mostly simple past tense forms, but he also used one past perfect form. Yusuke's percentage of accurate past tense verb usage decreased when

he increased in the number of self-repairs. Yusuke produced his highest percentage of accurate past tense usage in Pretest and then his percentage rapidly decreased in Week 1. In Week 2, he started correcting his own inaccurate past tense verb forms, so his percentage rapidly increased. For example, Yusuke said, "The next day, the old lady {says} said it is too complicated to use." In Week 6, Yusuke had his second highest percentage of accurate past tense verb usage, second to his pretest (75%). In addition in Week 6, he started using the past continuous tense, but he used it inaccurately.

5. Discussion

The first research question asked whether or not learners improve in syntactic accuracy over time from task repetition. Overall, the participants in this study did not improve in syntactic accuracy after seven weeks of task repetition intervention. With the percentage of error-free T-units, one participant slightly increased, one slightly decreased and one did not change. Furthermore, with the percentage of accurate past tense verb usage, two participants decreased and the third participant almost made no change after seven weeks. These findings support most earlier studies on form-focused instruction that repetition alone does not improve syntactic accuracy (see Fukuta, 2016; Gass et al., 1999; Kanda, 2015; Sangarun, 2005 for exceptions). While repetition speeds up automatization of speech (Bygate, 2001; Bygate & Samuda, 2005; Ellis, 2005) and frees up working memory (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999), it is possibly not explicit enough to direct learners' attention to what they need to focus on, in this case, the usage of past tense forms. Furthermore, unlike previous studies that only looked at the effects of repetition on speaking proficiency development from one single occasion, the present study looked at the effects of giving learners repetition intervention over seven consecutive weeks as it was hypothesized that the prolonged intervention period would have positive effects on syntactic accuracy development. However, this hypothesis was refuted because there were no clear improvements in syntactic accuracy after seven weeks of engaging in repetitive tasks. Therefore, it can be considered that task repetition, a more implicit type of form-focused instruction is probably not enough to direct learners' attention to the target forms.

The second research question investigated how learners changed in syntactic accuracy over time. In answering this question, participants' week-to-week changes over seven weeks were examined. While participants' performance of syntactic accuracy fluctuated, task repetition might have some short-term negative effects on syntactic accuracy as all participants decreased substantially between Pretest and Week 1. One possible reason is because learners have limited working memory so participants might have allocated their effort to fluency and complexity performances. In addition, participants might also have traded off accuracy due to limited attentional resources (Skehan, 2009). Alternatively, another possible reason is that the picture cartoons might not be completely equivalent in difficulty despite they were taken from the same textbook and were piloted beforehand. Therefore, participants might have made more grammatical errors in Week 1 because its cartoon might have been in some way more difficult than the Pretest cartoon.

Participants produced the lowest percentage of error-free T-units and percentage of accurate past tense usage in Week 1 but made noticeable increases in both percentages in Week 2. A possible reason might be that participants became more familiar with cartoon narration and it freed up more of their working memory (Levelt, 1989) so they were able to focus more on linguistic forms (Fukuta, 2016). However, the percentage of accurate past tense usage decreased in Week 3, increased in Week 4, and then the fluctuations continued in later weeks. These fluctuations suggest that while task repetition might have some positive effects on accuracy, it is not enough to stabilize the effects. Similar to the results of most previous studies (see Gass et al., 1999; Kanda, 2015; Sangarun, 2005 for exceptions), task repetition was not effective to develop syntactic accuracy. Nevertheless, compared to the percentage of accurate past tense usage, the percentage of error-free T-units increased more steadily with smaller fluctuations. After Week 1, the percentage of error-free T-units increased in Week 2, decreased slightly in Week 3 and then increased relatively steadily in Week 4, 5, and 6. A possible reason for this trend is that while task repetition does not direct participants' attention to past tense forms, it might have raised their awareness toward using more accurate grammatical forms.

6. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the effects of form-focused instruction on the syntactic accuracy development of speaking over time by giving learners task repetition intervention for seven weeks. It found that participants did not improve in syntactic accuracy despite given seven consecutive weeks of task

repetition intervention. Furthermore, participants actually decreased in syntactic accuracy after seven weeks when their local errors were analyzed. While repetition did not improve syntactic accuracy, it might have possibly caused fluctuations in learners' syntactic accuracy performance.

I would like to end this paper with some teaching implications. First, while previous studies have shown that the integration of form-focused instruction is effective for TBLT classrooms, repetition alone possibly does not improve the syntactic accuracy aspect of speaking. Learners are not likely to improve in syntactic accuracy unless they are explicitly directed to the target grammatical features that need improvement. Therefore, teachers need to give explicit instruction and direction on what learners need to improve, such as giving grammar instruction, demonstration, and feedback. Second, more task repetition is not always better than less. While previous studies have shown that task repetition is effective for developing fluency and complexity, this study found that a seven-week intervention did not generate more positive results on accuracy development than studies that engaged only cross-sectional intervention.

This study however is not without limitations. First, it only focused on grammatical accuracy development and overlooked possible changes in fluency and complexity. As previous studies have argued, it is important to measure speaking proficiency multidimensionally to more precisely and objectively evaluate oral proficiency (Norris & Ortega, 2009). In addition, it is likely to produce biased results if only single construct measurements are used (Bygate, 1996). Therefore, if this study is replicated, then it is also important to measure possible changes and trajectory of changes in fluency and complexity. Second, when calculating the percentage of accurate past tense verb usage, only past simple tense forms were analyzed. This is because there were very few past continuous and past perfect tense forms were produced by the participants. Therefore, if this study is replicated, then it would be important to encourage participants to produce different past tense forms in order to measure possible changes and the trajectory of changes in other past tense forms.

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