

Instruction focusing on ideas and opinions and the learning of linguistic forms

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This study examines the characteristics of L2 learners' usage of linguistic forms employed to express ideas and opinions to elicit pedagogical implications for an effective instruction for teaching learners to express themselves in the target language. Essays written by L2 learners were compared with those by native speakers. The L2 learners' essays were written by Japanese university students in the author's essay writing course, while the essays written by native speakers were from the Corpus of English Essays Written by Native Speakers¹⁾. Another corpus called the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays²⁾ was also used to support the findings of this study. The analyses of six target linguistic forms made the characteristics of the learners' usage clear and presented useful implications for effective teaching.

Key words: writing, ideas and opinions, linguistic forms

1. The problems with Instruction focusing on ideas and opinions

In the English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, one of the major problems is that students cannot often appropriately express their ideas or opinions in English. To express ideas and opinions, one must clarify main ideas and support them by providing good reasons. Since arguments can frequently become abstract and complicated, it is difficult for students to express their ideas or opinions in English because the limitation of the linguistic forms that students can use is likely to be a high hurdle in terms of students being able to express themselves more robustly. To overcome this formidable obstacle, we try to make the characteristics of linguistic forms used by L2 learners clear by comparing essays written by them with those by native speakers.

2. Linguistic forms in student essays on ideas and opinions

Whenever we read written products by our students, we find little variety in language use or the vocabulary and constructions that they use. The repeated use of the same

expressions makes their passages monotonous and tedious. Naturally, the limitation of expressions has an adverse influence on the contents of the writing; therefore, it becomes commonplace and uninteresting. Their English essays give the impression that the contents are less mature than essays of comparable topics written in Japanese.

Previous studies have found differences between non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) in the usage of linguistic forms by analysis of spoken and written corpora (Fordyce, 2009; Granger, 1998; Hinkel, 2003; Ishikawa, 2010).

Hinkel (2003) compared essays produced by NNSs with essays by NSs and found some common characteristics. According to Hinkel (2003), the texts written by NNSs had simpler syntactic features than texts authored by NSs. NNSs often used "be-copula constructions" and a static way of writing a paragraph. NNSs used more "copula + adjective constructions" than NSs. On the other hand, NSs used various structures including "activity verbs" and "causative verbs."

Hinkel also pointed out simple lexical characteristics of NNS texts. She found that NNSs used "vague nouns,"

which were more frequently used in the spoken English, “public verbs,” “private verbs,” and “expecting/tentative/wanting verbs” as categorized by Quirk et al. (1985). She also pointed out that in NNS texts, the same kinds of verbs were repeatedly used and that the texts were redundant. Moreover, she revealed that NSs used more idiomatic expressions than NNSs.

Kondo (2004) examined the written products of Japanese university students to clarify whether the characteristics of the students’ texts were identical to those described by Hinkel. The vocabulary used in their texts was analyzed from three different viewpoints: lexical variation, lexical sophistication, and lexical frequency level. The lexical variation was shown by a type-token ratio. The lexical sophistication was investigated by counting the number of “vague nouns” in Hinkel (2003), and “public verbs,” “private verbs,” and “expecting/wanting/tentative verbs” included in the students’ texts. The constructions were also examined for their structural complexity and structural variation. The structural complexity was shown by the number of T-units and the ratio of words/T-units, while the structural variation was examined by the use of “be-copula constructions,” “predicative adjectival constructions,” and “there-existential constructions.” The results of the analysis revealed that the diversity in vocabulary was relatively limited and the sophistication level was low. The measurement of the lexical frequency level indicated that most of the words used in the texts were fundamental high-frequency words. If the characteristics mentioned above are common in texts written by Japanese learners, the vocabulary and constructions employed in expressing ideas or opinions would be considerably limited as well. The following study focuses on linguistic forms to express ideas or opinions employed by Japanese students, and identifies characteristics of their usage of the forms by examining what forms were used and how they were used. NNSs’ usage was also compared with that of NSs to explore the implications for effective instruction to help learners express their ideas and opinions in English.

3. The Study

(1) The Purpose

Based on the findings of previous studies, this study examines differences between NSs and non-native L2 learners in the use of vocabulary and expressions used to express ideas or opinions in order to elicit pedagogical suggestions for an effective instruction to help learners better express their ideas and opinions.

(2) The Method

① Written Products examined in this study

Twenty essays written by NNSs and 20 essays by NSs were compared. The NNSs’ texts were written by Japanese university students in the author’s essay writing course. The essays written by NSs were selected at random from the Corpus of English Essays Written by Native Speakers (CEENAS), a subcorpus including 146 essays written by adult NSs in the Corpus of English Essays Written by Asian University Students (CEEAS), an English learners’ corpus in Ishikawa et al. (2011).

② The Materials

a. Linguistic forms examined in this study

The linguistic forms examined in this study included verbs for expressing ideas or opinions, expressions for differences of certainty, auxiliary verbs, expressions to explain reasons, transitions, and if-conditional sentences.

b. Prompts for the essays

The task for NNS writing required the students to agree or disagree with a prompt statement and support their opinions by explaining their reasons or examples. The prompt was as follows.

The prompt for writing an essay

It is better for children to grow up in a provincial city like Fukui than in a big city like Tokyo. Do you agree or disagree? Use specific reasons and examples to support your opinion.

The prompt was given on the spot, and the students were

asked to write their essays in 75 min. The two prompts below were used for the NS essays in CEENAS. The NSs wrote their essays by agreeing or disagreeing with the prompt statements and supporting their opinions with reasons or examples as in the NNS essays. Ten of the NS essays were written on Prompt 1, and the other 10 essays on Prompt 2.

Prompt 1: It is important for college students to have a part-time job.

Prompt 2: Smoking should be completely banned at all the restaurants in the country.

c. Contrastive analysis

The six linguistic forms above in both NNS and NS essays were counted³⁾ and the number of occurrences of each form was compared between NNS and NS essays. The results of the analysis and the characteristics of use in NS and NNS essays are summarized below.

(3) Results and Discussion

Let us look at the complexity and readability of NNS and NS essays before reporting the results of the contrastive analysis. Figure 1 shows the complexity as calculated by the number of words per sentence. Figure 2 shows the readability based on the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level⁴⁾. Obviously, both the complexity and the readability were higher in NS essays than in NNS essays.

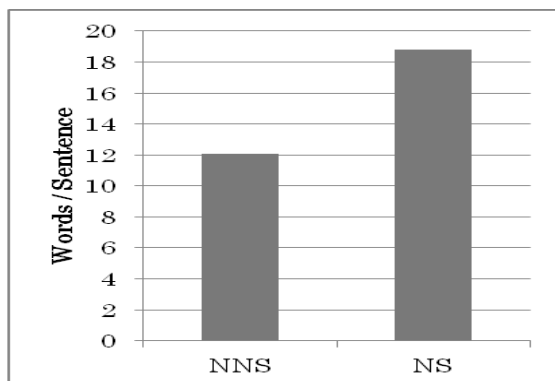


Figure 1. Complexity of the essays

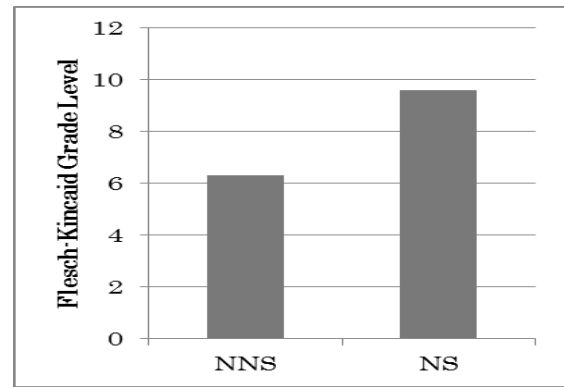


Figure 2. Readability of the essays

① Verbs for expressing ideas or opinions

Figure 3 shows the frequency of verbs expressing opinions, i.e., “think,” “agree,” and “disagree.” In the NNS essays, 81 occurrences of “think,” 22 of “agree,” and 1 of “disagree” were identified, while in the NS essays, only 6 occurrences of “think,” 6 of “agrees,” and 2 of “disagree” were observed. This indicates that the Japanese learners heavily depended on the verb “think” to express their ideas or opinions. The concepts of ideas and opinions can be categorized into different subconcepts of assertion, judgment, evaluation, suggestion, analysis, inference, proof, persuasion, demand, wish, etc. Therefore, if we encourage learners at the intermediate proficiency level to use verbs such as “insist,” “infer,” “estimate,” “suggest,” “expect,” “predict,” and “prove,” they will be able to express their thoughts in a more suitable way. Even textbooks for junior high school students include verbs such as “believe,” “feel,” “hate,” “hope,” “know,” “look,” “like,” “love,” “mean,” “need,” “seem,” “thank,” “want,” “wish,” and “worry.” When we have learners express their ideas or opinions, we should tell them to repeatedly use these specific verbs so that they can learn to use them without any difficulty.

On the other hand, the fewer uses of “think” in the NS essays indicated the NSs’ attitude was to explain the content more directly. The subjective expression “I think” frequently employed in NNS essays is likely to weaken the power of assertion, while in NS essays, opinions were expressed objectively based on the evidence, which leads to a stronger argument. Learners should be encouraged not to say

“I think” as a conditioned reflex, but to express main ideas clearly, and make strong assertion by offering information or examples to support their opinions.

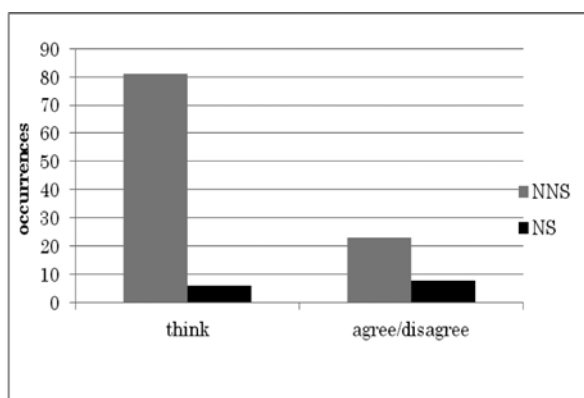


Figure 3. Frequency of verbs expressing opinions

② Expressions for differences of certainty

Besides using verbs that have more specific meanings instead of “think,” which has a neutral meaning, having learners be aware of their certainty about what they say could be beneficial to the development of the ability to express themselves more appropriately. We can encourage learners to use expressions that show differences in certainty such as “I’m convinced that,” “I’m certain that,” “I’m sure that,” “It is probable that,” “It is likely that,” “It is possible that,” or “It seems that.” We can also have them use adverbs in order to express differences of certainty. Konishi (2006) describes differences of certainty using adverbs as follows.

probably (80%) > likely (50%) > perhaps/maybe (20%-30%) > possibly (20% or below)

Konishi (2006:816)

In NNS essays, there was only one use of “perhaps” as one of expressions indicating differences of certainty, while in NS essays, there were one “I’m sure that,” one “likely,” nine “perhaps,” two “maybe,” one “possibly,” one “certainly,” and two “definitely.” In addition, modal auxiliary verbs were used to express different levels of certainty. Ando (2005) summarizes the different degrees of certainty of modal auxiliaries as below.

Uncertain	That could be John.
	That might be John.
	That may be John.
	That should be John.
	That would be John.
	That ought to be John.
	That has to be John.
	That will be John.
	That must be John.
Certain	That is John.

Ando (2005:331)

③ Auxiliary verbs

Figure 4 shows the frequency of auxiliary verbs in NNS and NS essays. The analysis of the use of auxiliary verbs revealed that “can” in the root use to mean ability or situational possibility was more frequently used in NNS essays than in NS essays. The NS essays included six occurrences of “can” in the epistemic possibility meaning, while the NNS essays included no use of “can” in this usage.

Moreover, modal auxiliaries such as “will,” “may,” “must,” and “should” were less frequently used in NNS essays than in NS essays. The underuse of “must” might be related to the learners’ attitude of trying to avoid strong assertions. We should encourage learners beyond the intermediate proficiency level to show their attitudes toward the described contents by employing modal auxiliaries in an epistemic use.

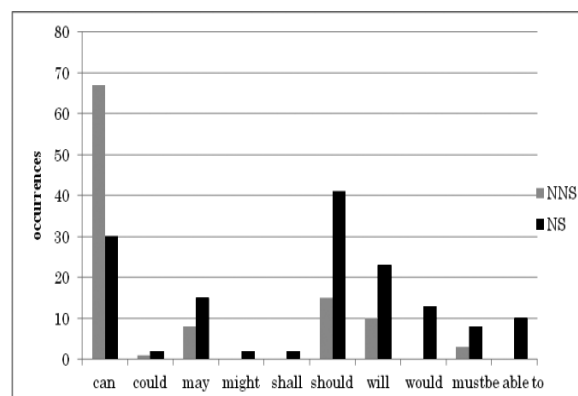


Figure 4. Frequency of auxiliary verbs in NNS and NS essays

④ Expressions to explain reasons

One of the groups of key expressions for stating ideas or opinions are those that precede a reason. In NNS essays, “so” (40 occurrences) and “because” (22 occurrences) were overused. In addition, “therefore” (4), “because of” (1), and “that’s why” (1) were observed, while in NS essays, “because” (7), “because of” (5), “so” (3), “therefore” (2), “since” (1), “for some reasons” (1), etc. were used. As can be seen from the number of each usage, the use of expressions like “so” and “because” to explain reasons is relatively limited. The low frequency of these expressions indicates that NSs tend to directly assert their ideas or opinions and clearly explain the cause and effect relationships without resorting to signal words such as “so” or “because,” just as in the case of “I think.”

It is not easy for Japanese learners, especially beginners to describe content and explain the relationship of cause and effect in a logical way. They can make their ideas and opinions clear by using the signal words to indicate a causal relationship. As their proficiency progresses, they should be able to logically explain the contents of their argument rather than relying on the signal words. We should teach not only conjunctions such as “so” and “because” but also expressions like “cause,” “produce,” “create,” “lead to,” “result in,” “bring about,” “give rise to,” “come from,” “result from,” “be due to,” “be the result of,” etc.

We have studied the characteristics of the uses of linguistic forms so far. A chi square test was conducted to check whether there was a significant difference among the uses of each word. As can be seen in Table 1, the results show significant differences in NNSs’ overuse of “think” and “agree,” and NSs’ frequent use of “should” and “would.” The results also documented NNSs’ heavy reliance on “so” and “because.”

Table 1. Differences in the frequency rate of words

Word	χ^2	p-value	df	Corpus	
think	73.68	0.0000	1	Kondo	$P < .001^{**}$
agree	10.13	0.0015	1	Kondo	$P < .01^*$
can	18.60	0.0000	1	Kondo	$P < .001^{**}$
could	0.00	1.0000	1		n. s.
may	0.90	0.3426	1		n. s.
might	0.38	0.5363	1		n. s.
shall	0.38	0.5363	1		n. s.
should	8.29	0.0040	1	CEENAS	$P < .01^*$
will	2.99	0.0836	1		n. s.
would	9.66	0.0019	1	CEENAS	$P < .01^*$
must	1.00	0.3184	1		n. s.
so	35.19	0.0000	1	Kondo	$P < .001^{**}$
because	18.68	0.0000	1	Kondo	$P < .001^{**}$

Some other corpora which collected NSs’ written products were also used to characterize usage of the linguistic forms discussed above. USC and UM are subcorpora included in a corpus called the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) compiled by Sylviane Granger. The former gathered essays written by the students at the University of South Carolina, while the latter collected essays by the students at the University of Michigan. The essays in both corpora are similar to those in the present study in that they are argumentative essays written by college students of approximately the same age as our students’ without referring to any particular resources.⁵⁾

Table 2. Four different corpora

Corpus	Kondo	CEENAS	USC	UM
The number of Samples	20	20	17	43
Token	4453	5058	12730	16502
Token/Sample	222.7	252.9	754.9	384.3
Type	809	1218	2454	2872
Type/Token Ratio	0.182	0.241	0.193	0.174

As in CEENAS, the verbs expressing opinions, “think” and “agree” were less frequently used in USC and UM essays than in NNSs’ essays.⁶⁾

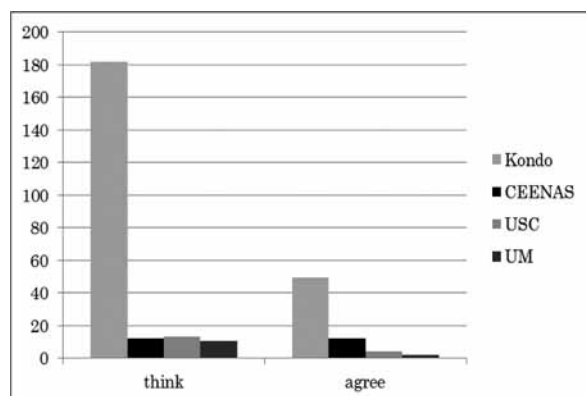


Figure 5. Frequency of verbs expressing opinions in NNS and NS essays 2

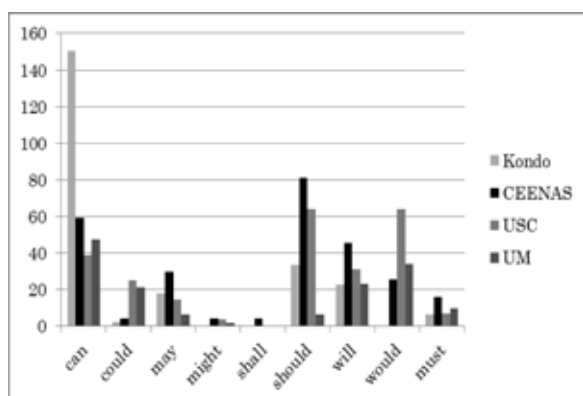


Figure 6. Frequency of auxiliary verbs in NNS and NS essays 2

Similarly, modal auxiliaries were underused in NNSs’ essays, compared to the essays from USC and UM.

⑤ Transitions

Figure 7 shows the frequency of transitions used in NNS and NS essays.

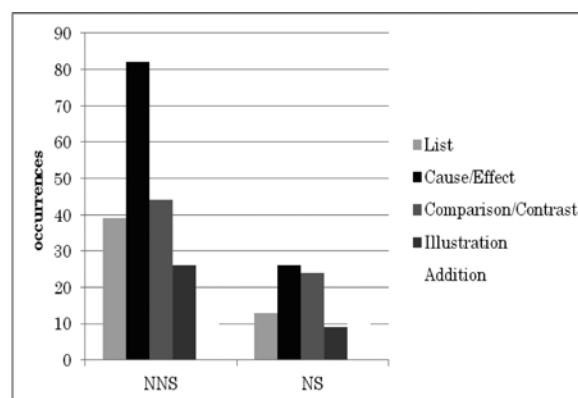


Figure 7. Frequency of transitions used in NNS and NS essays.

In addition to the connectors used to express a cause and effect relationship, more transitions of listing, order, comparison, contrast,⁷⁾ and illustration were used in NNS essays than in NS essays. In particular, transitions of list and order seem to be repeatedly taught from junior high school onward. Moreover, the frequent use of transitions for illustration might reflect NNSs’ dependence on offering examples to avoid difficult explanations about abstract things. On the other hand, NSs do not characteristically use transitions because they can clearly express their ideas and opinions in a logical way so that the cohesion of discourse is maintained by the content. Therefore, they do not need to explicitly state relationships among sentences or paragraphs.

⑥ If-conditional construction

Another characteristic difference in the use of expressions for stating ideas or opinions between NNSs and NSs is the use of “if-conditional construction.” It was more frequently used in NS essays than in NNS essays. Students can strongly support their ideas by evaluating the results of their hypotheses under various possible conditions expressed by this structure. In that sense, the use of the conditionals should be encouraged for explaining ideas and opinions.

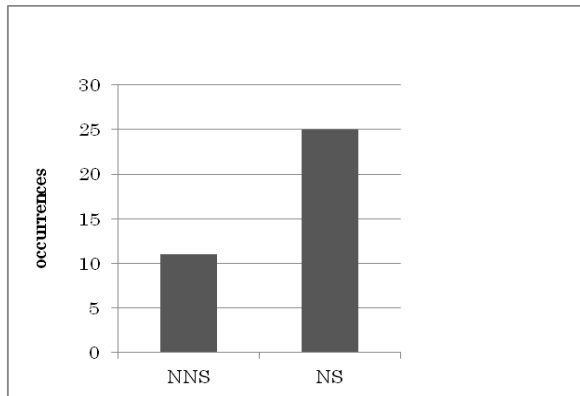


Figure 8. Frequency of if-conditional construction

4. Two main points of formal instruction

Let us consider instructional implications based on the results of the study.

One is that we should take into our instruction a developmental perspective of language. Take the instruction of transitions as an example. As is shown in Figure 9, having learners use transitions is effective for heightening cohesion of discourse at a low proficiency level. As proficiency grows, it is better to have them depend less on transitions and develop their arguments in a logical way to maintain high cohesion level.

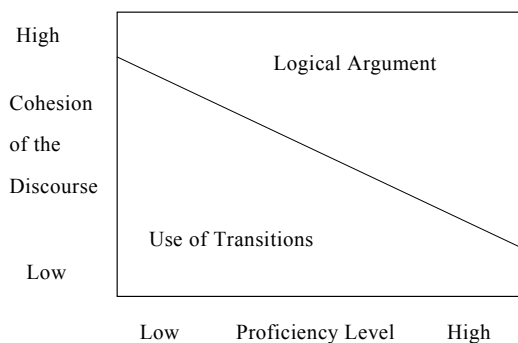


Figure 9. Instruction of transitions

Similarly, verbs for expressing opinions, expressions showing different degrees of certainty, modal auxiliaries, and expressions of reasons should also be taught for students to more appropriately use according to their proficiency level.

The other implication from the present study for effective teaching is that the size of usable linguistic forms should be

increased.

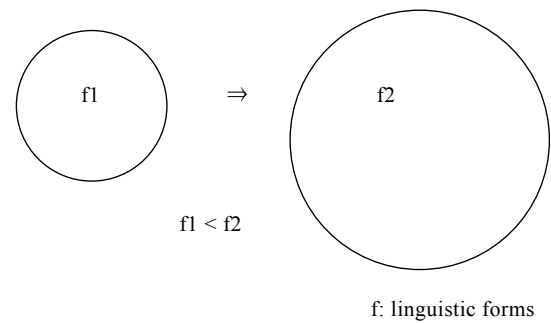


Figure 10. Development of linguistic forms 1

The “f” in Figure 10 refers to linguistic forms such as vocabulary, constructions, and grammar rules. As f1 expands into f2, in junior high and high school lessons, such linguistic forms are taught one by one so that learners’ knowledge of English can grow by accumulation, and the width of accumulated knowledge tends to be considered as the development of linguistic forms.

Another way for interlanguage development to improve is to increase productive linguistic forms. As in Figure 11, the size of passive forms⁸⁾ remains the same ($p1=p2$), while the size of active forms grows from $a1$ to $a2$. This is the development of a/p ratio, the proportion of active forms to passive forms. For example, adverbs such as “clearly,” “completely,” and “undoubtedly,” and adjectives like “absurd,” “beneficial,” “contemplating,” “effective,” “fascinating,” “fragile,” “harmful,” “invaluable,” “necessary,” “obvious,” “oppressive,” “positive,” “productive,” “promising,” “serious,” and “unfair” enriched expressions of ideas and opinions in the NS essays. It is quite natural that there would be a huge difference in vocabulary knowledge between NNS and NS, but it should be noted that these words, which were not used in NSS essays, were known words that the learners had already encountered.

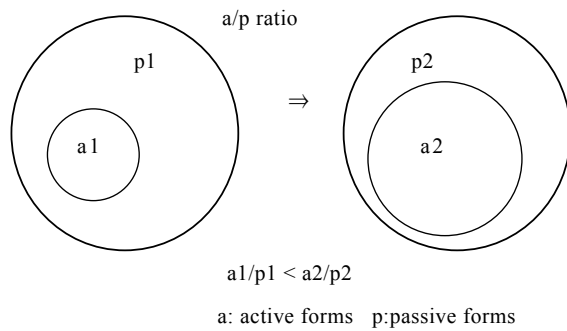


Figure 11. Development of linguistic forms 2

5. Conclusion

Studies on SLA support the importance of input, and show the necessity of output as well. The environment where we teach English as a foreign language is significantly different in nature from L1 acquisition or English as a second language teaching situations. It is difficult to sufficiently secure comprehensible input for learners to acquire English naturally. Under such circumstances, we need to give students opportunities for output, while trying to provide them with as much comprehensible input as possible. When they express their ideas and opinions in English, they naturally reuse linguistic forms that they have learned, which may lead to more efficient foreign language learning. Through communicative experiences, receptive linguistic forms are expected to develop into productive forms.

More often than not it takes us much time to prepare for elaborate communication activities like information-gap activities. Moreover, the activities tend to be artificial and far from the experience of natural communication.

Instruction focusing on ideas and opinions enables learners to be engaged in genuine communication in which the reuse of learned linguistic forms is promoted, and the a/p ratio can be developed. Therefore, the proposed instruction has significant meaning in terms of learning linguistic forms as well as a major communicative function of exchanging ideas and opinions and an effective way of motivation.

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Notes

1. The learner corpus compiled by Shinichiro Ishikawa at Kobe University. It is one of the subcorpora included in the Corpus of English Essays Written by Asian University Students(CEEAUS), an English learners' corpus in Ishikawa et al. (2011). He has developed the corpus into a more extensive corpus, the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE).
2. The corpus compiled by Sylviane Granger at the Centre for English Corpus Linguistics (CECL), Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium.
3. The software KWIC Concordance for Windows Ver.5, which was developed by Satoru Tsukamoto at Nihon University, was used to count the number of the six linguistic forms for expressing ideas and opinions. http://www.chs.nihon-u.ac.jp/eng_dpt/tukamoto/kwic.html
4. This is one of the indices for readability based on school grade level in the United States of America. It is calculated by applying the formula below. A score of ten means the text reads at the difficulty level of tenth grade. $(0.39 \times ASL) + (11.8 \times ASW) - 15.59$: ASL stands for the number of words per sentence and ASW the number of syllables per word.
5. Different corpora have different attributes such as writers, resources, types of essays, time, and length, so it is not easy to compare them in a strict way, but it is very likely that we can understand general tendencies in language usage.
6. In Figures 5 and 6, the vertical axis shows the adjusted frequency per 10,000 tokens.
7. Expressions of comparison and contrast include comparative and superlative forms of adjectives and adverbs.
8. "Passive forms" is a term coined by the author from "passive vocabulary." We can use "receptive forms" instead of that phrase. Likewise we can rephrase "active forms" to "productive forms."

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要 約

英語の授業における意見・考えの表出を求める効果的な指導法を開発する手がかりを得るために、日本人英語学習者および英語母語話者によって書かれた英作文において使用された、意見・考えを表現する動詞、確信度の違いを表す表現、助動詞、接続語句等の言語形式を比較分析した。その結果明らかになった学習者言語の特徴から、指導に発達の視点を取り入れることの重要性および産出的言語形式の拡大の必要性の2つの有益な教育的示唆が得られた。