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Grammatical Judgment Fluctuation: Japanese University Students

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This paper reports an ongoing longitudinal study aimed at obtaining insights into the foreign/second language learning behavior of Japanese university students (graduates of a largely rote-memory system of Foreign Language instruction).

The study focuses on the grammatical judgments of students majoring in English during their first and second years of university coursework. The grammatical judgment format required subjects to (a) determine whether a sentence was right, wrong, or uncertain; and (b) correct that portion of each sentence judged incorrect.

The instrument consisted of forty items and was diagnostic in nature, evaluating a range of selected learning-tasks which included articles, plural and third-person singular endings, passive, tense, and relative clauses. The instrument was administered at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of the two-year instructional period.

Of particular interest in this report are the interlanguage responses of the subjects at different points in their course of instruction. Student responses for each item were compared over time both in terms of subject awareness of grammaticality, and error analysis of the corrections made for items judged incorrect.

Initial observations suggest that the judgments of Japanese university students are relatively unstable and fluctuate along a continuum between syntactic and semantic levels of grammaticality.

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