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Final Project

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Overview

The past century of second language acquisition (SLA) research has seen a dramatic shift from promoting traditional grammar-based language instruction to communicative language instruction (Richards, 2009). Methods from the early 20th century such as Audiolingualism, Total Physical Response and Situational Language Teaching featured syllabuses that tended to emphasize grammatical form, but during the 1970s and 1980s, researchers began to study the effects of approaching language instruction in “natural” ways (Ellis, 2002; Richards & Rodgers, 2010). Primary among them was Krashen, whose theories of language acquisition – as opposed to formal, in-class language education (what his theory labels “learning”) – had a dramatic effect on second language (L2) instruction through the early part of the 21st century (Richards & Rodgers, 2010).

Krashen’s Natural Approach assumes that all learners will gradually acquire second language knowledge in ways that mirror their acquisition of their native language (L1). Since children do not initially need formal lessons in their L1’s grammar, L2 students should not receive formal instruction in the target language’s grammar; they will learn how to use the target language piece by piece, just like they learned how to communicate in their L1 (Richards & Rodgers, 2010). However, recent research is chipping away at Krashen’s belief in omitting formal instruction in grammar altogether (Ellis, 2002). Learners who acquire a second language using Krashen’s Natural Approach tend to be unable to produce grammatically accurate communication despite being fluent in the target language (Hammerly, 1991; Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain, 1995; as cited in Ellis, 2002). Indeed, “natural language learning does not lead to high levels of grammatical and sociolinguistic competence” (Ellis, 2002, p. 17).

Researchers are now returning their attention to studying the benefits of formal grammar instruction, often in connection with communicative task-based instruction. Ellis (2002, 2009) and Fotos (2002) both refer to studies that indicate learners, especially adults, expect to receive form-based instruction when learning another language. Many learners of all ages are mentally prepared for grammar instruction and actively want to learn the L2's grammar in order to communicate more effectively. "For such learners, a 'communicative' syllabus that eschews a focus on grammar may be missing the mark" (Ellis, 2002, p. 21). However, Ellis cautions that only intermediate or above students should receive formal grammar instruction because students first need a solid lexical base in a language before they can be presented with inductive opportunities to extract grammar rules for themselves (2002, p. 23).

Ellis (2002, 2009) and Fotos (2002) both suggest an instructional approach that blends traditional form-based instruction with current communicative trends, particularly task-based instruction. Richards (2009) agrees with Skehan's (1996, as cited in Richards, 2009) weak view of task-based instruction, arguing that tasks are important but should be pre- or post-ceded by formal grammar instruction. Ellis (2002) envisions "a task-based approach that emphasizes discovery learning by asking learners to solve problems about grammar" (p. 172). Learners should be made aware of structures and encouraged to notice them when they encounter these features in the target language. This type of formal instruction in grammar is important because learners "are more likely to heed [a grammatical form] when they come across it in the input and also to attend to how it differs from the current interlanguage rule that underlies their own performance in the L2" (Ellis, 2002, p. 26-27). The goal should not be instant form mastery but a slow "consciousness raising" that will eventually help a student mentally move explicit, consciously learned grammar rules into their implicit, subconscious interlanguage (Ellis, 2009;

Fotos, 2002). Research suggests that a “consciousness raising” approach to L2 grammar teaching is effective (Schmidt, 1990; Fotos, 1993; Fotos, 1994; as cited in Fotos, 2002). In other words, formal grammar instruction will help L2 learners perform a type of subconscious, “mental contrastive analysis” to compare acquired L2 knowledge with learned L2 knowledge – particularly learned rules about grammar.

Ellis (2002) recommends inductive lessons that involve a task. Teachers should focus the lesson on a grammatical form that is a known source of difficulty. That is, explicit grammar lessons should be remedial in nature. Learners should be presented with enough data to enable them to discover the grammatical rule in question. The task should require minimal production of language; instead, learners should act as data analysts. They should study the data and try to construct their own solution to the grammatical problem presented. Finally, learners should be given the opportunity to apply the grammar rule they discovered. Again, the focus should not be on immediate mastery of the concept; rather, students should be encouraged to learn from their mistakes (Ellis, 2002).

Research indicates that teaching learners about form before beginning a meaning-focused activity helps learners connect the grammatical structures being taught with what they already know about their L1 and the target language (Cadierno, 1995; Ellis, 1995, 1998; Lightbown, 1992; Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Robinson, 1996; White, 1991; as cited in Fotos, 2002). Based on these studies, Fotos (2002) recommends a three-part grammar lesson:

1. explicit grammar instruction, preferably at the beginning of the lesson;
2. communicative activities containing many usages of the instructed form; and
3. summary activities to focus learners’ attention on the grammar form they were instructed on and then encountered communicatively. (p. 138)

By combining form-based instruction with interaction, learners receive feedback from their peers to help them become more aware of differences in their language production and the accepted production of the target language (Ellis, 1994, 1997; Nunan, 1993; as cited in Fotos, 2002).

Research indicates that when learners work in pairs or groups, they “tend to use longer utterances, and are more relaxed and less anxious about using the TL (target language)” (Fotos, 2002, p. 139). Further, speech produced through learner interaction does not seem to be less grammatical than in teacher-led classroom discussions (Pica, 1997; Pica & Doughty, 2005; Rulon & McCreary, 1986; as cited in Fotos, 2002). In summary, a teaching approach that combines form-focused lessons with task-based opportunities for interaction has the potential to increase learners’ long-term explicit and implicit knowledge of grammatical forms and will therefore help them become more accurate communicators.

Various types of tasks can be used in the L2 classroom, but Fotos (2002) identifies four key features that maximize the use of task-based instruction to teach grammar regardless of which information-gap activity is used. The task should require a single solution, all task participants must agree on the solution, all participants must exchange information, and there must be time allotted to allow participants to plan their language use. Often the solution required is the creation of a grammar rule, which learners will later share with the rest of the class.

Following the lesson, the instructor can present the task’s topic as a formal grammar lesson or assign production exercises or a reading selection as reinforcement (Fotos, 2002). Richards provides a summary of similar methodological principles from Skehan (1996a, 1996b, as cited in Richards, 2009):

- exposure to language at an appropriate level of difficulty
- engagement in meaning-focused interaction in the language

- opportunities for learners to notice or attend to linguistic form while using the language
- opportunities to expand the language resources learners make use of (both lexical and syntactic) over time. (p. 160-161)

By following Fotos' and Skehan's suggestions, an appropriate grammar task can be created for any level of L2 learner.

Rationale

One of the biggest problems English students face – either as native speakers or second/foreign language learners – is subject-verb agreement (Baxter & Holland, 2007; Byrd, n.d.; C. Gibbs, personal communication, December 4, 2010; V. Parmenter, personal communication, October 14, 2010; Shibuya & Wakabayashi, 2008). The basic rule is simple: English verbs must agree with their subject in person and number. Why, then, is the concept so difficult to teach and so difficult for learners to understand? (Byrd, n.d.). There are two hypotheses that attempt to explain why inflectional morphemes like plural and tense markers in English are difficult for L2 learners: the Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis (Hazneder & Schwartz, 1997; Prévost & White, 2000; as cited in Shibuya & Wakabayashi, 2008) and the Representational Deficit Hypothesis (Hawkins, 2005; Hawkins & Chan, 1997; Hawkins & Liszka, 2003; Tsimpli, 2003; Tsimpli & Dimitrakopoulou, 2007; as cited in Shibuya & Wakabayashi, 2008). According to Shibuya and Wakabayashi,

The Missing Surface Inflection Hypothesis argues that L2 learners have no difficulty in acquiring syntactic features but they have problems with mapping the formal feature on the relevant surface forms, while the Representational Deficit Hypothesis maintains that

L2 learners cannot acquire certain formal features when these features are not instantiated in their L1. (p. 252)

In other words, L2 learners will not internalize the rules of SVA if (1) they do not understand how to add/change the necessary morphemes, and/or (2) their L1 does not have similar grammatical features they can use for interlanguage comparison.

Because of the tendency of both native speakers and L2 learners to have difficulty with SVA, this grammatical form is suitable for use as part of ongoing, remedial, form- and task-based lessons. By using “consciousness raising” techniques, an instructor can help learners become more aware of SVA as they encounter it, which could eventually help the learner acquire SVA rules as part of his implicit knowledge of English (Ellis, 2002; Fotos, 2002; Richards, 2009). Ongoing remediation would also address both hypotheses outlined by Shibuya & Wakabayashi (2008), since exposure to SVA along with tasks and interaction should move explicit grammar rules about SVA into implicit interlanguage knowledge (Noonan, 2004).

Objectives

The goal of this project is to create a series of lessons that can be used in an ESL classroom to increase L2 learners’ awareness of SVA in English. The target age group is high school students, and the class length is a 90-minute block. The lesson sequence relates to North Carolina’s Standard Course of Study’s Language Proficiency standards for English language learners (ELLs). Standard I states, “English language learners communicate for Social and Instructional purposes within the school setting,” and Standard II states, “English language learners communicate information, ideas and concepts necessary for academic success in the content area of Language Arts.” (North Carolina Department, n.d.) Since the lesson plans are

designed for high school learners, the lesson plans are also related to the state standards for English I, English II, and English III, which apply to all high school students regardless of native language. These courses are the equivalent of 9th-, 10th- and 11th-grade English classes.

Competency goal six in the standards for each of these years states, “The learner will apply conventions of grammar and language usage,” specifically, goal 6.02 highlights the instruction of SVA in high school English classes.

The lessons’ main objective is to increase learner awareness of SVA through form- and task-based instruction and is based on research presented earlier in this paper. Because “consciousness raising” is not associated with an immediate improvement in learners’ use of L2, the results of these lessons may not be evident for quite some time. However, learners should show gradually improvement in their use of SVA.

Lesson Plan Sequence

The lesson plans presented herein are rough outlines that follow guidelines described by Farrell (2009). Each lesson consists of five parts: perspective, stimulation, instruction/participation, closure, and follow-up. During the perspective stage, the teacher reviews material previously introduced and previews the upcoming lesson. Next, the teacher prepares students for the new lesson with an “attention grabber,” designed to draw students into the lesson by helping them relate the lesson to their lives. During the third stage, instruction/participation, the teacher presents the learners with the lesson, checks for student understanding, and encourages student involvement in the activity. Next, the teacher closes the lesson by reviewing the day’s activities and providing previews of future lessons. Finally, the teacher provides follow-up activities designed to reinforce the information from the day’s lesson (Farrell, 2009).

The lesson plans are presented in a format based on a lesson plan template from Guilford County Schools, N.C. The 90-minute class is subdivided into smaller units to help the teacher maximize time-on-task. The term Farrell used in his five stages plan is listed in parentheses under each description in the original lesson plan template. Also, the abbreviation “TLW” is used for “the learner will,” and “TTW” is used for “the teacher will.”

Each lesson begins with 10 to 15 minutes for a “bell work” activity. This activity is designed to bring learners into the classroom to reduce congestion in the school’s hallways. Learners are expected to quickly complete this short assignment, which is typically a review of a previous lesson. Next, there is a 5- to 10-minute period for the teacher to review the bell work and introduce the day’s lesson; this functions as Farrell’s stimulation stage. Instruction/participation follows for about 15 to 20 minutes, after which learners spend about 20 to 30 minutes participating in a pair or group activity. The remaining class time is spent in closure and follow-up: reviewing the activity, answering learners’ questions, and previewing upcoming lessons. Finally, learners are assigned homework and/or “ticket-out-the-door” assignments, short review questions that must be completed before the learners leave the classroom.

Procedures

This lesson plan sequence contains a brief outline of three days’ worth of instruction. The first day’s activities are designed to formally introduce the grammatical concept of SVA. The teacher should elicit information from learners about their ideas of SVA, including definitions of keywords (subject, verb, agreement, noun, person, number, singular, plural, etc.). If the class does not have a textbook with information about SVA, there are several web sites that can be used instead. The Purdue Online Writing Lab, for example, has an excellent yet concise overview of SVA. The Online Writing and Learning at LeTourneau University also has a section

devoted to SVA; their site has more graphics and includes different learning activities for different learning styles. The LeTourneau University site would be useful if the class has computers with Internet access because learners, or pairs or learners, could work through the web site's text and short quizzes at their own pace.

After explicit but very basic instruction about the form, the teacher should provide learners with examples of the correct usage of SVA in English. Next, students should be put into pairs to work on an identification task. A sample text can be used such as a newspaper article or an excerpt from a book or magazine. The text can either show all one type of SVA (e.g., singular nouns with singular verbs) or a mixture of singular and plural forms. The first day's task should be to identify all types of SVA, regardless of number or person. Since this lesson is based on the idea of "consciousness raising," the goal is for students to become aware of the forms. By using authentic texts, the teacher can increase learner interest, especially if the text is relevant to recent classroom discussions (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Following the task, the teacher should question students about their findings. Were all the examples of SVA marked? Did students have trouble identifying certain types of SVA, such as third-person singular? Based on this information, the teacher should adapt the second and third lessons in the sequence to target the forms that presented the most difficulty.

The second day's lesson should continue to build on learners' knowledge of SVA. The teacher should review the grammar rules described the day before by eliciting student responses and restatements of the rules for SVA in English. Again, students can be given a text where they have to identify the subjects and verbs, but the teacher should vary the forms depending on the learners' responses during the previous day's lesson. To increase the interaction portion of the activity, the teacher could include a dialogue for the learners to use rather than an article to read.

Depending on learner ability, the dialogue could become a cloze (gap-fill) activity where the learners are required to provide the correct SVA forms of simple verbs.

Finally, the third day of the lesson sequence should continue to increase learners' awareness of SVA. Again, the rules should be reviewed, and students should be encouraged to explain the grammatical structures in their own words. Learners will complete another activity to help them notice SVA. For example, today's activity could be a reading passage that includes all incorrect forms of SVA that learners would have to correct. As in the previous activity, the difficulty of the assignment can be increased or decreased depending on the learners' skill levels.

Effectiveness

The lesson plans' effectiveness can be assessed based on a series of questions posed by Farrell (2009, p. 35).

1. Did the class seem to be learning the material well?
2. Were the learners engaging with the foreign language throughout?
3. Were the learners attentive all the time?
4. Did the learners enjoy the lesson and feel motivated?
5. Were the learners active all the time?
6. Did the lesson go according to plan?
7. Was the language used communicatively throughout?

In this informal assessment, the teacher should use her judgment about the class as a guide when revising the lesson(s) for future use. Since the lessons will be using a "consciousness raising" approach, the teacher may not see immediate results in the learners' use of correct SVA.

However, the above criteria are still relevant in helping judge the learners' attitudes toward this type of activity.

Conclusion

While communicative approaches tend to be favored by most modern ESL researchers and educators, communicative approaches cannot completely replace “old-fashioned” form-based instruction. Research has shown that communicative or task-based approaches alone do not provide learners with sufficient grammatical knowledge to be effective communicators in the target language (Hammerly, 1991; Kowal & Swain, 1997; Swain, 1995; all as cited in Ellis, 2002). However, form-focused instruction alone is not the answer either. Instead, teachers must use both form-focused instruction and communicative techniques (Ellis, 2002; Fotos, 2002). One way to help learners understand the grammar of an L2 is by “consciousness raising,” a gradual process that builds upon Krashen’s language acquisition theory by including explicit grammar teaching (Ellis, 2002; Fotos, 2002). Lesson plans that include both a form-based and communicative approach will benefit learners’ long-term knowledge and proficiency in an L2 (Noonan, 2004).

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