The Role of Consciousness-Raising and Noticing in Second Language Acquisition

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This paper examines the role of formal grammar instruction in second language acquisition by reviewing the theoretical and empirical basis supporting the notion of consciousness-raising and the associated notion of noticing. Some of the most important theories on how second languages are acquired are outlined, then the results of recent research into the contribution the use of consciousness-raising and noticing techniques can make in the classroom is summarized. The conclusions reached in the research indicate that consciousness-raising techniques encourage the noticing of grammatical features by drawing learners' attention to the properties of language and the research results show that this can promote learners' awareness of the functions of form and the relationship it has to meaning. It should be noted, however, that it is not argued that using techniques aimed at consciousness-raising will immediately lead to acquisition. Rather, such techniques allow students to recognize the function of structures already focused on when they meet them in subsequent input. This in turn will pave the way for ultimate attempts at using them in output. The implications of these findings for classroom practice are discussed. Examples of the kinds of tasks that might be carried out in the classroom to give students an increased awareness of and sensitivity to the language they are learning are given. It is emphasized that the application of consciousness-raising techniques in the classroom is aimed at making learners aware of essential grammatical forms and the way they work to create meaning. Such techniques are regarded as a supplement to, not a substitute for, communicative language teaching methodologies and are aimed at the attainment of higher levels of accuracy as well as communicative competence in second language acquisition.

1. Introduction

There cannot be a second language (L2) teacher who has not stood in front of his or her class working from carefully planned teaching materials or, so he or she assumes, an expertly designed textbook and wondered, "Is this really what needs to be done to help these students learn this language? How do I know what will work best? Does anybody know?" A search for answers to these questions in the literature will not provide the final word on how second language acquisition (SLA) takes place. It will, however, introduce theories which the teacher may not yet have considered, and help confirm or disprove some he/she has already been basing her teaching practice on, by instinct if not by studied conviction. In this paper we will first outline briefly some of the most important theories about how second languages are acquired, then go on to examine the theoretical and empirical basis of the notion of consciousness-raising (C -R) and the associated concept of noticing in terms of the contribution their proponents argue they can make to second language learning and teaching. Finally, we will briefly outline suggestions for classroom applications and examine the implications the notions of C-R and noticing have for current teaching practice.

2. Theories of Second Language Acquisition

One of the most commonly accepted theories of how first languages are learnt is the universal grammar (UG) theory proposed by Naom Chomsky which claims to account for the grammatical competence of every adult no matter what first language he or she speaks. This competence is said to be based on a set of principles which apply to all languages and an associated set of parameters that can vary from one language to another but only within certain limits. Cook (1996, 156) explains that according to UG theory, acquiring a second language requires only the resetting of parameters relating to aspects of the first language which differ from the second by listening to input from L2. "So learners need to spend comparatively little effort on grammatical structure, since it results from the setting of a handful of parameters". Instead, he explains that a great deal of detail needs to be learnt about how individual words are used. The language teacher's task, then, is to provide language input that allows students to find out what parameters need to be changed and in what ways. Unfortunately for the second language teacher, while many theorists feel that UG is the most powerful account for L2 learning because of the way it links it current ideas about language and language learning, it is a model which covers only core aspects of syntax and has little to say about just how parameters can be reset.

The second language learner has the first language available as a data source, but theorists argue about the extent to which UG can be accessed by the L2 learner and whether, or how, formal grammar instruction should be carried out to supplement this built-in competence. There are three distinct theories about the role of formal instruc-

tion in SLA, that is "direct pedagogic intervention-attempts to influence the way interlanguage develops through formal instruction..." (Ellis,1990, 130), which have influenced second language acquisition theories and approaches and methods in recent times, and it is these theories which research into C-R attempts either to confirm or refute. The claims are that:

(1) learners will not acquire grammar just by noticing it; they must have it explained to them

(2) it is not necessary for learners to consciously notice the grammar they must acquire; exposure to it will result in acquisition

(3) learners will learn grammar if they notice it; pedagogical practices must include those which will train learners to notice grammar

C-R has been around in different guises for a long time and these three approaches to the teaching of formal grammar can be re-expressed in terms of the traditional approaches to second language learning and teaching they reflect. The first represents one extreme on the scale and is exemplified by the audio-lingual method which focused on the early mastery of phonological and grammatical structures which were seen as building blocks to be combined by sets of rules which had to be mastered as part of a grammatically structured syllabus which gave students little access to authentic input. At the other end of the scale is Krashen's (1985, 2-3) Input Hypothesis that claims that all that is required for people to acquire a second language is comprehensible input at roughly the right level of difficulty and a sufficiently low affective filter to allow this input 'in'. A conscious awareness of grammar is considered to be of little significance in Krashen's theory of second language acquisition and this has made his ideas generally difficult to accept.

The third theory about language learning is the one which most informs the discussion of C-R and noticing in this paper. It is based on the acceptance of the fact that formal grammar instruction, but of a different kind to that which was inherent in the audio-lingual method and its predecessor the grammar translation method, has an important role to play in second language acquisition.

Ellis (1990) has made a detailed review of earlier empirical studies of the role of explicit grammar instruction in SLA. His conclusion was that, overall, the studies support the view that instructed learners seem to perform better than naturalistic learners, especially where advanced levels of attainment are the objective. In an early study Higgs and Clifford (1982,68) argue on the basis of their own observations that adults who learn a foreign language without any formal grammar instruction during the basic learning stage can never achieve a high level of proficiency and will exhibit fossilized structures or terminal proficiency profiles. One more recent classroom study by Lightbown and Spada (1990) supports Higgs and Clifford with evidence that the differences in accuracy with which young French speaking students used the verb *be* correctly rather than the erroneous *have* in their introducer or "presentational" forms

appeared to be due to differences in the amount of time teachers spent on form-focused instruction in the form of reactions to learners' errors or requests for assistance in programmes that were primarily communicative. The researchers suggest (1990, 323) that these results provide further support for the hypothesis that form-based instruction within a communicative context contributes to higher levels of linguistic knowledge and performance and that the pedagogical technique is in accord with the notion of C-R. Krashen argues (1993, 723) that such results can only be achieved by "drilling" and students were "monitoring" only, but the researchers claim that, since the form could still be used accurately a year later, it had in fact become input into the interlanguage.

Varying positions on the need for formal grammar teaching are represented in the views outlined above, but before any other studies are examined it is necessary to explain what is meant by the terms consciousness-raising and noticing.

3. Consciousness-Raising and Noticing

A survey of the literature indicates that the term consciousness-raising is not a new idea in SLA. Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985, 274) use the term to describe "the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language". The term C-R is also widely used in Rutherford's book *Second Language Grammar: Learning and Teaching* (1987, 18) in which he accords a central role to the place of grammar teaching in the second language learning curriculum as "a *facilitator* of language learning, or as the means rather than the end with a number of different roles to play as well as modes of operation or means of attention getting and degrees of explicitness". In Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985, 274) it is pointed out that C-R is a reaction to currently popular teaching methodologies which attempt to approximate 'real-life' communicative use of language and avoid drawing attention to the grammatical forms of language. Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1985, 275) do not, however, argue that C.R. " will *automatically* ensure the acquisition of some structure; i.e. that C-R is a sufficient condition for acquisition to take place". They outline only the possibilities explicit grammar teaching of this kind presents as part of a methodology for second language teaching.

Psycho-linguistic theories of consciousness which lie behind C-R attempt to explain what is called noticing. Schmidt (1990) considers the questions of whether conscious awareness at the level of noticing is necessary for language learning (or whether learning can take place subliminally ; whether it is necessary to consciously 'pay attention' in order to learn (or whether learning can take place incidentally); and whether learner hypotheses based on input are the result of conscious insight and understanding or an unconscious process of abstraction (whether there is such a thing as implicit learning). He concludes (1990, 149) that the language that becomes intake is that which learners notice. He argues that this requirement of noticing can apply

equally to all aspects of language (lexicon, phonology, grammatical form, pragmatics), and can be incorporated into many different theories of second language acquisition, with the notable exception of Krashen's, as already discussed.

More recently, Robinson (1995, 318) has taken the debate into the field of cognitive psychology to argue that noticing is detection with awareness and must operate in conjunction with rehearsal in short-term memory as a necessary prerequisite to learning and subsequent encoding in long-term memory. This has important implications for language teaching methodology.

4. Empirical Support for the Role of C-R and Noticing

A significant amount of evidence in favour of the need for focus-on-form and C-R exists. Some of the most significant studies will be summarized here.

Day & Shapson (1991) used students in French immersion classes whose levels of spoken fluency and listening comprehension were high but whose grammatical skills showed persistent weaknesses to evaluate the effect of an integrated formal, analytic and functional, communicative approach. For the purposes of the study, a curriculum unit focusing on the conditional was designed to provide "opportunities for students to use this form in natural, communicative situations; by reinforcing their learning with systematic, focused games or exercises; and by encouraging their metalinguistic awareness" (1991, 27). The treatment was found to be useful in improving oral and written grammatical skills and lends support to the view that formal instruction is necessary if grammatical accuracy is an objective.

White, Spada, Lightbown & Ranta (1991) investigated, in a mainly communicative programme, the efficacy of form-focused instruction and corrective feedback or 'input enhancement', which term they report Sharwood Smith (1991) has suggested as an alternative for C-R since it can be argued that we cannot know whether a learner's consciousness has been raised, we can only know that there has been input. Their (1991, 417) investigation showed evidence that input enhancement can bring about genuine changes in learners' interlanguage systems and they argue that it is possible that, left to themselves, L2 learners may not always perceive the structures they are exposed to in naturalistic input so they will not become intake. They further argue that this conclusion is of special significance for communicative language teaching programmes which provide primarily naturalistic positive evidence in the classroom, but where students are exposed to 'incorrect' positive evidence from other learners which they may not be able to filter out. Their (1991, 418) claim is that "some focus on form and some error correction provide more emphasis on what is possible in the L2, as well as explicit indications of what is not possible".

Green & Hecht (1992, 180), examined the question of where C-R techniques might be more useful than formal rule learning and suggest that "straight-forward, mechanically governed linguistic categories can be usefully taught to learners as rules and

readily practiced in the context of short linguistic exercises", while "semantic categories like aspect are probably best presented as explanations than rules, with learners' attention drawn to how they operate in larger contexts" in the manner suggested by Rutherford's grammatical C-R. They argue (1992, 179) that, since their research showed the interaction between implicit and explicit rules to be so complex, in that students were shown to perform better when they knew a rule, but were only successful in learning the rules about fifty percent of the time, time spent on activities with a focus on meaning might be more worthwhile than the teaching of the formal rules of grammar.

Also interested in the affects of different types of grammar C-R tasks, Fotos (1993) researched two types of tasks to see which was more likely to lead to significant subsequent learner noticing and developing formal knowledge of problematical grammatical structures. The two types were teacher-fronted grammar lessons and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks. Fotos (1993, 400) found evidence firstly, of the effectiveness of grammar C-R activities, whether they be teacher-fronted instruction, or performance of interactive, grammar problem solving tasks, in promoting significance levels of noticing the target structures in subsequent communicative input, and secondly, of the fact that grammar C-R tasks are nearly as effective as formal instruction in the promotion of noticing. Fotos (1993, 400) points out that the next stage is for studies that demonstrate that noticing features is, in fact, positively related to the emergence of the structures in the learners output.

One such study is a small one by Nobuyoshi & Ellis (1993), which, although it nowhere mentions consciousness-raising or noticing, is often quoted in support of these theories (Swain & Lapkin (1995), de Bot (1996), Ellis (1995), Kowal & Swain (1994)), examined the use of focused communication tasks as part of classroom pedagogy with the view that they can make some linguistic features more prominent, but without sacrificing attention to meaning. This focus can be achieved by design or methodology. Methodology is claimed to be important in leading students to become 'conscious' of the grammatical focus of a task, for instance the past tense. For example, requests from the teacher for clarification of utterances containing a past tense error retain focus on the past tense while the task remains communicative. In effect this involves the teacher asking a student to rephrase a sentence with a past tense error by interrupting an otherwise communication focused exchange with such expressions as "Sorry?" or "Uh?". In this way students are encouraged to produce output that is grammatically correct - something Nobuyoshi & Ellis claim (1993, 209) is generally considered difficult to do.

Yip (1994) focused her research into the role of C-R on the question of which aspects call for grammatical instruction and why. She researched the learnability of English ergative verbs because they are known to cause learner difficulty. Her (1994, 125) findings confirm this difficulty and show that C-R can be effective in their teaching

and also add support to the valuable role C-R can play in providing negative evidence "without resorting to the traditional "red-pen" strategy".

Kowal & Swain (1994, 87) found evidence which suggests practical classroom applications for C-R. They had young students work collaboratively on a text reconstruction task. This technique allows learners to become aware of gaps in their existing knowledge and raises their awareness of the links between form, function and meaning of words and at the same time helps them obtain feedback from peers and teachers as they work on the task. Swain & Lapkin (1995, 384) also found that learners become aware of gaps in their linguistic knowledge as they produce their L2 and that when this happens they engage in thought processes of a sort which may play a role in second language learning, including engaging in grammatical analysis which, though not essential to comprehension, is essential to accurate production. In other words, noticing a problem can 'push' learners to modify their output by triggering certain mental processes - processes which are a part of second language learning. They stress (1995, 386) the need to further explore the association between conscious knowledge of rules and greater L2 accuracy and further suggest that the ways in which students identified and solved problems as they produced the target language has potential for indicating the kinds of tasks which focus learner attention where it is most necessary.

When the conclusions of this sampling of studies into the effectiveness of form-focused grammar teaching in the form of C-R are summarized it is found that the approach claims to offer advantages over types of instruction where little or no attention is paid to grammar in that it encourages noticing of grammatical features by allowing attention to be persistently called to them.

C-R techniques can also help overcome the problems which may be caused by incorrect input from other class members in communicative language teaching classes by allowing corrective feedback and negative evidence to be presented. At the same time the use of C-R in such classes can, when attention is paid to methodology, allow focus on grammatical features while maintaining communicative content. Certain kinds of tasks, for instance text reconstruction tasks, can make students aware of gaps in their existing knowledge and increase awareness of the relationship between formal language features and meaning.

Of particular note in the review of research is the relationship between results drawn from classroom practice and our current understanding of the cognitive processes involved in language learning which can help determine not just whether learners learnt what they were taught, but what is the best way to go about grammar teaching. Ellis (1991, 241) describes C-R as "an approach to grammar teaching which is compatible with current thinking about how learners acquire L2 grammar".

5. Implications for Classroom Practice

Research findings and theoretical arguments in favour of C-R should not be taken

to imply that a return to teaching and practicing grammar in the way it was done in the past is advocated. Ellis (1991, 233-234) compares the characteristics of C-R and traditional grammar practice and concludes that a significant difference is that C-R does not require repeated production on the part of the learner, because the aim of C-R is not to enable him/her to produce a structure correctly immediately but to 'know about it'; that is C-R can occur without practice by the implementation of a task-based approach that emphasizes discovery learning by having learners solve problems about grammar. Willis & Willis (1996, 69) suggest that C-R activities should aim to provide learners with texts or sets of examples upon which they must carry out operations which will result in an increased awareness of and sensitivity to the language. These operations could require students to do any of the following:

(i) search a set of data and identify a particular pattern or usage and the language forms associated with it

(ii) sort a set of data according to similarities and differences based on formal or semantic criteria

(iii) check generalizations about language from language data

(iv) find similarities and differences between patternings in their own language and patternings in English

(v) manipulate language in ways which reveal underlying patterns

(vi) recall and reconstruct elements of text in order to highlight the most significant ones

(vii) learn to use reference works

There are many activities in this list which are already being carried out in many classrooms but in a perhaps more piece-meal fashion. Willis and Willis (1996, 70) suggest starting points for C-R activities could be semantic concepts such as main themes, lexical fields, notions, functions, metaphor, or a word or part of a word (e.g. as, in, -ed, -s, 's), or yet again categories of meaning (e.g by + -ing, by + agent etc.). Both written and spoken texts (with transcripts) could be analyzed by students for these features. Willis & Willis (1996, 76) conclude that "it is unlikely that they will immediately assimilate and put to use all the features they have covered in the activities, but their consciousness will have been raised and they will more likely notice these linguistic features when they occur in future input".

Higgs & Clifford (1982, 74) discussed this issue and suggested that a choice must be made between acquiring adequate but often irreparably inaccurate communication skills in a course in which "successful communication is encouraged and rewarded for its own sake", and placing learners on a programme which stresses linguistic and grammatical accuracy from the beginning. It may now be argued that, as a result of developments in recent years in the application of C-R activities in the classroom that it is possible to design syllabi where the two objectives of communicative competence and linguistic accuracy can be combined (Fotos (1994), Celce-Murcia, Dornyei &

Thurrell (1997)). The design and implementation of such a syllabus would require the planning of lessons based on carefully written or selected texts, a thorough awareness of learners needs in terms of their current knowledge of the target language, and a thorough knowledge of grammar and how it shapes meaning in written and spoken language as well as the a clear grasp of the principles of C-R task design.

The popularity of the notion of 'communicative competence' has, in some teaching environments, produced teachers trained to find ways to get their students to talk a lot, but not in how to talk well and accurately. The ongoing research into C-R and its applications suggests change may be on its way. An examination of the differences in methods of presentation of the content of textbooks which include tasks aimed at C-R with older text books based on other approaches would be a valuable follow-up to this paper, and the writer hopes to make this the subject of a future research project.

6. Conclusion

Empirical research into the cognitive and practical processes involved in SLA provides evidence not only for the fact that some kind of form-focused grammar instruction promotes more of the explicit kind of knowledge of the target language that will ultimately result in students 'getting the language right', than approaches to teaching which include little or no focus on formal grammar. In particular the notions of consciousness-raising and noticing, that is, drawing learners' attention to the formal properties of language, have been shown to be successful in promoting learners' awareness of the functions of form and the relation it has to meaning. While it is not argued that these techniques immediately lead to acquisition, they do allow students to recognize the function of specific structures when they meet them in subsequent input and pave the way for ultimate attempts at using them in output. C-R techniques shown to be effective in the classroom include, apart from teacher-fronted instruction and the carrying out of interactive problem solving task by students, the use of requests for clarification to focus attention on incorrect usage, as well as the provision of negative evidence to help learners gain an understanding of both what is possible and what is not possible in L2. These findings and the suggestions for classroom applications that have arisen from them are particularly significant at a time when second language teaching practice has long been influenced by approaches which maintain that sufficient input combined with chances for creative output are the most important conditions for SLA.

The application of C-R in the classroom demands the careful integration of techniques to make learners aware of essential grammatical forms and the way they work to create meaning. In other words awareness comes first; practice is limited to activities which will allow the input to become intake according to the learner's own schedule. C-R is regarded as a supplement to, not a substitute for communicative language teaching methodologies and its aims are the attainment of higher levels of

accuracy as well as communicative competence in SLA.

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