
Essays on Instruction and Curriculum

Cohesion: Form Focused and Implicit Feedback

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This is a report on action research conducted in two English writing classes with Japanese university students. The aim is to determine the effect of formal grammar intervention on a recurring problem in the area of cohesion in the production of written texts. The problem is analyzed and a control group receives implicit error feedback whilst the intervention group receives explicit formal instruction in topic-comment analysis. Both groups show improvement, however there is no significant difference between the two groups in a follow-up analysis of their written texts. These findings are discussed in relation to existing research and the cultural context.

Ellis (1997) reviewed current research in the field of form focused pedagogy, and by way of summary, asked this question; Should teachers teach grammar?

The answer to this question, based on the available research, then, is “Yes, teachers should teach grammar”. However it does not follow that all learners should be taught grammar. In many parts of the world, learners are exposed to large amounts of grammar teaching in the early stages of their language learning and fail to develop any fluency in the target language. Such learners are likely to benefit from communicative activities rather than more grammar teaching.... A good example of such learners is high school students in Japan. After six years of studying English, much of which is taken up with the teaching of grammar, many of these students leave school with no procedural ability to communicate in English (Ellis, 1997: 71–73).

On the other hand, the research evidence in favor of the communicative approach is also less than conclusive. Researchers investigating the effects of intensive communicative or immersion programs, in which teachers focus on communicative tasks and avoid error correction, have found that learners do not attain very significant levels of grammatical accuracy although they may achieve communicative goals (Lightbown and Spada, 1990). Hammerley (1987) reviews six French programs in Canada and finds that immersion programs result in “a very defective and probably terminal classroom pidgin” (Hammerley, 1987: 397). This is due to the fact learners spend a lot of time communicating with other learners and do not experience a “natural sociolinguistic setting” such as Krashen (1982), Prabhu (1987) and other communicative theorists advocate. Krashen refers to error correction as “a serious mistake” (Krashen, 1982: 74), forcing avoidance behaviour and disrupting the focus on communication.

The research does not produce definite answers; it shows that both form focused and communicative programs achieve different goals with different students. Faced with this

situation, the question concerning form focused teaching remains an issue in every classroom and requires an empirical answer. Ellis (1997, 44) says, “Ideally they (teachers) need to investigate this question for themselves (i.e. engage in action research in their own classrooms)”. The following study undertakes this task.

This study describes classroom-based action research conducted at NUCBA Faculty of Foreign Languages in 2002 which asks the following question:

Do Japanese EFL learners in a writing and editing program learn more effectively when they are given explicit form focussed (or grammar focused) metalanguage as feedback in order to facilitate self correction and editing? There were two groups. One group received a program of explicit form focussed feedback. A control group received implicit feedback on the same error types. Each group comprised an intact class of 16 students with an average TOEIC score of 360. An external rater was used to assist in assessing the persistence and quality of errors in the post-experiment sample of writing.

Burns (1999) surveyed the field of action research (AR) and provided the following definition:

1. Action research is contextual, small scale and localized—it identifies and investigates problems within a specific situation.
2. It is evaluative and reflective as it aims to bring about change and improvement in practice. (Burns, 1999: 30)

She adds that most definitions include the idea of a critical dimension. “A critical dimension implies going beyond investigating the immediate practices of the classroom to analyse how these practices are mediated by the unexamined assumptions of the educational system or institutions. This view holds that educational processes are necessarily political and are based on certain often implicit ideological positions, beliefs or values” (Burns, 1999: 30–31).

The main objection to AR is its lack of “generalizability” (Burns, 1999: 23). A moment of brief reflection will reveal, however, that the quantitative findings of large-scale experimental research in SLA are just as unsuitable as AR for the purpose of generalization and accommodation to all classrooms in all situations. As Ellis remarks, “Research has not and ... cannot produce definitive answers” (ibid.: 45 and Allwright, 1988).

The main stages of AR according to Burns (1999: 35) are:

1. exploring
2. Identifying
3. planning
4. collecting data
5. analyzing/reflecting
6. hypothesizing/speculating
7. intervening
8. observing
9. reporting

In order to be brief I shall skip some steps in reporting this action research program.

Exploring and Identifying the Problem

Second language English writing classes at NUCBA receive instruction in the production of English texts which demonstrate certain qualities, chief among them being cohesion and coherence (Halliday and Hasan, 1976). The aim is that learners acquire *inter alia* performance skills in certain aspects of cohesion. It has been noted that learners acquire these cohesion skills in stages. This suggests some further evidence for Pienemann's thesis (1989) that there are developmental stages in second language acquisition which can be identified with the acquisition of certain grammatical forms (Pienemann, 1989). The acquisition of certain cohesive devices can be seen as appearing at clear-cut stages in the learners' development. Learners at NUCBA appear to acquire fluency in cohesion in the following broad sequence; conjunction, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, reference, and finally substitution. There is a broad movement from the semantic to the grammatical level, from the discourse level to the more lexico-grammatical level. In first year writing classes students learn to use conjunction and reference. This is reinforced in second year. However, this is the stage when other problems seem to loom large, namely lexical cohesion.

Lexical Cohesion

Lexical cohesion is the one form of cohesion, which is dealt with less frequently in textbooks, and when it is covered, less space is devoted to it than to other aspects of cohesion, such as conjunction. Oshima and Hogue in their popular series on academic writing devote only two pages to this particular topic in the third level book in this series.

Another term for lexical cohesion is reiteration. "Reiteration is a form of lexical cohesion which involves the repetition of a lexical item ... (either) the use of a general word to refer back to a lexical item or at the other end of the scale ... the use of synonym, near synonym, or super-ordinate (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 278). Indeed, they describe the boundary between lexical cohesion and reference as by no means clear-cut. Lexical cohesion as a cohesive agent often depends on the occurrence of reference in the same context (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 279) Halliday and Hasan's example makes the point quite well about the different kinds of lexical cohesion and in particular the link with reference:

There's a boy climbing that tree.

- a. The boy's going to fall if he doesn't take care. (Repetition of the same word)
- b. The lad's going to fall if he doesn't take care. (Synonym)
- c. The child's going to fall if he doesn't take care. (A super-ordinate term)
- d. The idiot's going to fall if he doesn't take care. (A general word)
- e. He's going to fall if he doesn't take care (Reference). (ibid., 1976: 279-80)

Some examples of texts from a writing task in second year will present the problem clearly, I hope. The four texts (following) are part of the pre-test stage conducted in the experimental and the control group. This consisted of a writing task asking students to describe something they are familiar with, namely purikura booths, to an overseas friend. There was a projected image on the screen in the class at the time. Students had some time to brainstorm, plan and write in class. Students typed their texts onto word processors in class, providing a (brief) opportunity for editing and revision; indeed more so than normally occurs when students use pencil and erasers. The texts were read by the teacher and systematic errors were analyzed.

An external rater was used for pre and post study assessment.

Writing Samples

Below are four samples of student writing from the stage before intervention.

1. I will talk about describing purikura photo machines to a friend who has never been to Japan. Purikura machines are very pleasant and convenient. First of all we take a picture in a purikura photo machines looks like take a picture with using camera, Next we can choose some pictures in there. Then we can do scribbles to our pictures For example I always write my name and date to a pictures. This is not finish! Purikura machines are not only take a picture but also make a shiel. After take a picture we can push a stud, and maked a shiel. The shiels can crucifixion everywhere. For example I always Purikura crucifixion on my notebook or my purse. Indeed purikura photo machines are very convenience. "Purikura" means print club in short is purikura. I like purikura photo machines very much. Purikura machines very popular in Japan. Specially purikura machines are very populated by young girls.

2. When I was 11 years old Piurikura became famous photo machine in Japan. Of course my friends and me went to photo to purikura photo machine, too. The cost is 300 yen to 400 yen. The best cheap machine is 200 yen. But the cost of all purikura machines are 40 yen in now. This machine takes a lot of money from us. There are a lot of purikura machines in Japan. The mean of purikura is "Print Club". When we tooks a photo, a photo becomes a seal, and we looking a photo , giving a photo to our friend. We are very enjoy!! So we use a lot of money to purikura photo machine. I using a lot of money, also. But purikura photo machines are very enjoy, interesting and exciting. So we can not stop using purikura photo machine. Maybe I think we will use continue purikura machines.

3. Purikura photo machines are very popular in Japan for some reasons. First, purikura is convenience. The machine prints photos quickly. You don't need a camera. You need only coins. It is very easy and it is interesting to pose. There are many purikura machine in Japan. The second reason is, it is cheap. Third, we enjoy exchange purikura with many friends. It is easy to remember their faces. It help making friends. Fourth, the machine has various frames. We will not get tired of taking purikura. Finally I think you should try purikura. It must be enjoyable.

4. Purikura is famous machine in Japan. Maybe, many girls took a purikura more than one times. There are many reasons which purikura famous in Japan.

First purikura is seal, so it can put somewhere. Seal can give my friends and change the purikura. Actually I have a lot of friend's purikura.

Second, word can write in purikura . For example, it happened thing can write the purikura. This purikura become a piece of my memory. It is important for me it.

Analysis of the Students' Systematic Errors

All samples of student writing were read and a study of systematic errors was undertaken. The samples above have been chosen to illustrate typical systematic error types.

Conjunction and ellipsis are present and operate well enough in most texts. Conjunction is quite possibly being over-used at this stage in the learners' development. Conjunction and

textual Themes (Halliday, 1985) are used to stage and sequence the texts and give a degree of explicit cohesion. This over-use is typical of learner development at this relatively new stage in acquisition. It should diminish with practice and some implicit error correction. The glaring problem in most texts is the same; lexical cohesion. The most explicit device for achieving cohesion, after conjunction, is the use of repetition of the same word or phrase and in close proximity. Reference is almost absent, despite the marked use of reiteration. That is to say, repetition could be replaced at this stage by use of anaphoric reference; devices such as pronouns (“purikura machines” replaced with “they”) or the use of a general noun or a super-ordinate (such as “the machines” or “booths”) (Halliday and Hasan, 1976: 275).

Intervention

The decision was made to intervene with a feedback strategy designed to address this particular systematic error. The reactive focus on grammar, rather than a straight forward (pro-active) grammar focus was preferred because this approach is congruent with the aims of communicative teaching and provides a rationale for the inclusion of grammar items which reflect the learners’ needs (Doughty and Williams, 1998: 206). The decision to intervene does place a burden on the teacher to skilfully analyze systematic errors as they arise. It also raises another issue concerning the learners’ readiness to learn the grammar points that feedback may comprise. This issue is discussed in Pienemann (1985; 1989) and Doughty and Williams (1998), where the advisability of moving beyond the learners’ readiness to learn is debated. Once again, the teacher, faced with conflicting research results, must make an empirical choice; and the choice made here is to intervene. The results seem to justify the intervention.

Two markedly different approaches to intervention were employed to address this issue. This difference in intervention styles is the main subject of this study. In one class a form of implicit or covert error correction was employed, whilst overt or explicit feedback was employed in the other group.

Ellis (1997) describes feedback as of two main types; the terms he uses are overt and covert. One group received mainly covert feedback. Covert feedback can take many forms. The kind employed here is called recasting, where the teacher focuses on error by reiterating the phrase which has an error and, possibly, adding a suggestion or correction. Sometimes the teacher’s tone may suggest there is an error and invite the learner to make a correction. Recasting is the type of correction given by caretakers to children and consists of “nudging” learners towards the recognition of errors by repetition with a small correction or, in a stronger version, covert correction may involve some kind of topic incorporation (Schachter, 1986), making the error the subject of a topic shift in the teacher-student dialogue. The error correction program in the covert error analysis group began with the teacher modeling error correction on the OHP. Then students made use of computers displaying texts from the other class for peer editing. Students read the texts in pairs, with the teacher eliciting editing suggestions from the students, and directing students towards the repetition, suggesting other choices for re-writing in order to avoid repetition. Then students worked onscreen, in pairs, with computers, editing texts from their class, employing these guidelines with some guidance from the teacher, walking from group to group.

The group who received overt error correction were offered reasonably sophisticated metalinguistic grammar tools for the analysis of cohesion in written texts, in order to edit their

own and their fellow students' texts. They were trained in the use of topic-comment analysis, following the research and classroom work by Connor and Farmer (1990). This theoretical approach was adopted because it would require learners to identify the Topical Theme in a clause (Halliday, 1985). Topics in topic-comment analysis are similar to Topical Themes in systemic functional analysis. Students then list these in sequence and identify the kind of thematic progression being used in a text and, where this is the appropriate editorial choice, learners switch the topics (or Topical Themes) to avoid repetition.

Topic-comment analysis was adopted for the group receiving explicit grammar-focused feedback because it has been used with success in other studies (Connor and Farmer, 1990). Also topic-comment analysis is somewhat less sophisticated than other (comparable) linguistic analyses such as Theme/Rheme and Information Structure analysis or indeed lexical cohesion analysis. There is something quite "teachable", and indeed useful, about topic comment analysis partly because of "the fairly intuitive nature of topic identification" (Connor and Farmer, 1990: 128) whereas, in Halliday's analysis, the identification of Theme and other elements in the information structure of the clause is complex (Halliday, 1985). As Connor and Farmer (*ibid.*: 128) write "previous research has shown high rater inter-reliabilities; 86.5% in Wittke's research (1983) and 88.9% in Connor and Schneider's work (1988)" in the identification of topics. The categories of Theme in systemic analysis, on the other hand, are too difficult for a writing class to cover when time is crucial and, ultimately, not as useful for further editing purposes. Topic-comment analysis is useful well beyond the limited use in this experiment for topic identification.

Halliday and Hasan's analysis of cohesion (*ibid.*, 1976) also requires more metalinguistic knowledge than the class had demonstrated any readiness to learn; also the categories in Halliday and Hasan have a heuristic quality that might baffle EFL learners. As Halliday and Hasan write, there "can be no rigid division (of cohesive devices) into watertight compartments. There are too many instances of cohesive devices which lie on the borderline between types and could be interpreted as one or the other" (*ibid.*, 1976: 88).

The explicit grammar focus of the form-focused feedback lessons (in which students were presented with and then practised topic comment analysis) were adapted from Farmer and Connor (1990). These classes practised editing peer texts. This practice culminated in students performing an edit task on their personal writing.

The post-experiment stage of this program consisted of presenting another classroom writing task—the same to both groups—and asking an external rater to assess the writing for the presence of repetition.

Results

The somewhat startling result was that there was no difference between the two groups. That is to say, both groups showed similar improvement in the target form. The results of both overt and covert or implicit and explicit form focused correction were to all intents and purposes the same. However a survey of the research literature on feedback and consideration of the students' context and preferred learning styles may clarify this unexpected result.

Speculation on Results: Explicit Feedback in the Japanese Context

Researchers divide feedback into many types, with the overt/covert distinction usually uppermost. Several studies of the effect of feedback on learning conclude that all types of feedback improve the rate of language acquisition (Carroll and Swain, 1993; Doughty and Williams, 1998: 207; Ellis, 1997: 78–80). This suggests a critique of the natural language syllabus and indeed the extreme version of the communicative syllabus. Most studies also agree that explicit form focused feedback is significantly more successful than implicit feedback (Lyster and Ranta, 1997). The results of this particular classroom based action research go in the opposite direction. I think that the reason for this is to be located in the remarks by Ellis, quoted at the beginning of this study. Put simply, Japanese students of English may prefer the covert or implicit form of error correction because of their history of years of studying English as an explicit set of grammar rules. They may well accept this approach and some may prefer it, however the rate of acceptance is not greater than for covert correction. Other experimental studies in this field clearly indicate improved acquisition of forms when learners receive explicit metalinguistic feedback (Lyster and Ranta, 1997).

These AR results challenge those of other major studies (Doughty and Williams, 1998: 206; Lyster and Ranta, 1997) which indicate that explicit grammar focused correction is significantly better in improving the rate of language acquisition. I think this study underlines the importance of classroom based AR, which can be sensitive to the learners' context or what Vygotsky refers to as the situation of teaching and learning. As Burns (1999) points out in her study of action research, the action researcher often finds himself or herself face to face with the social and cultural setting of the classroom when undertaking action research. Because of the differences that exist in the social context of learning, action research is valuable that in a way "large" studies sometimes cannot be, because such studies do not incorporate individual social differences.

Conclusions

1. Lexical cohesion can be taught effectively using either implicit or explicit feedback, depending on the social and institutional situation of teaching and learning.
2. The developmental stages in the acquisition of cohesive devices appear to be significant and this requires further research.
3. Learner stages appear to be more important in achieving results than the kind of feedback provided.
4. Classroom contexts differ, so AR is advocated to deal with specific situations in order to ascertain how and when to introduce new language forms.

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