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The Role of Grammar: An Insight into the Skill-Building and the Output Hypotheses

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Content

Abstract

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Abstract

The paper examines the claim of the skill-building and the output hypotheses that conscious knowledge is a necessary step in developing second language competence. An investigation into the claim indicated that consciously learned knowledge can be used to edit the output of the acquired system, which is correct with the monitor hypothesis. In fact, acquirers need to get exposure to a rich diet of input for developing language competence.

Keywords: Skill-building; consciously learned knowledge; Linguistic problems; Hypothesis testing

1. Introduction

The Comprehension Hypothesis, (Krashen, 2002, 2003) claims that we acquire language when we receive comprehensible input slightly ahead of the current level of understanding, accompanied by a low affective filter. This runs counter to the traditional view that conscious learning is necessary for developing second language linguistic competence. In fact, conscious learning will help learners edit the output of the acquired system.

2. The Skill-Building Hypothesis

The skill-building hypothesis claims that we first learn consciously the language skills such as grammar rules, vocabulary, syntax, and spelling and later applying them in real situations by laborious drills and exercises. The hypothesis assumes that linguistic competence comes from conscious learning and the consciously learned knowledge will help us comprehend a text. This

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claim is examined with 21 ESL students who attended form-focused classes for twelve years. Moreover, they believed that grammar and skill-building were the paths to second language competence. The learners were asked to write two short paragraphs using the given information in order to test their language competence.

Table 1

The table presents the results of the short test

	Judge 1	Judge 2
Mean	2.47 (8.26%)	2.63 (8.77%)
SD	1.31	1.27

The results of the short test confirmed that learning and practicing grammar rules and other items (deductive learning) did not help them develop language competence. This is because there are several limitations to the use of consciously learned grammatical knowledge on a wide variety of tests and in real situations (e.g. Truscott, 1996, 1998; Murphy & Hastings, 2006).

2.1. Conditions for using consciously learned knowledge

Studies attempted to demonstrate the efficacy of grammar instruction showed only peripheral effect. The modest gains show that more direct instruction in grammar means a bit more consciously learned competence. Furthermore, the conditions for monitor use were met in these studies (Krashen, 2003). The Monitor Hypothesis, (Krashen, 1982) which is related to the Comprehension Hypothesis, clearly states that the following three conditions must be met, in order to use rules successfully:

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1) The acquirer must know the rule. This is a formidable constraint because rules are very complex to be taught and learned, and are often misstated in grammar books (Murphy & Hastings, 2006). Moreover, grammar textbook writers do not present all the rules; teachers do not teach all the rules given in the textbooks; students do not learn all the taught rules and they do not remember all the learned rules.

2) The acquirer must be focused on form. Generally, students appeal to conscious knowledge less when reading and writing and engage more with rules only when doing grammar exercises (Ponniah, 2007). Moreover, students who experienced a rich diet of comprehensible input engage very less with consciously learned grammar rules even when they are taking a grammar test. In fact, they depend more on subconsciously acquired grammatical competence (Ponniah, 2009).

3) The acquirer must have time to apply the rules. Performers may not have time to use rules in real situations. If they overuse rules when speaking, fluency will be seriously hampered.

2.2. The value of grammar

Despite the limitations of using consciously learned rules of grammar, learning grammar is not a forbidden one. Learning grammar through direct instruction can be used to edit the output of the acquired language. Krashen (1981, p.2) claims "utterances are initiated by the acquired system. Our fluency in production is based on what we have 'picked up' through active communication. Our 'formal' knowledge of the second language, our conscious learning may be used to alter the output of the acquired system, sometimes before and sometimes after the utterance is produced". The monitor hypothesis claims that conscious knowledge can be used only as a monitor and it does not turn into acquisition. It is, of course, 'knowing about' language.

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2.3. Why more grammar study

In spite of the difficulties with the skill-building approach, why does the delusion of teaching grammar exert a very powerful influence on language education?

1. It is believed traditionally that direct instruction in grammar is a necessary step in developing second and-foreign language linguistic competence.

2. Teaching grammar is an entrenched habit accepted by both the student and the teacher and the natural approach to language teaching with little or no grammar is a suspect (Murphy& Hastings, 2006).

3. Another reason for forcing the learners to study grammar is the fact that it is assumed that they can acquire language in a short span of time by learning and practicing grammar.

4. Researchers find grammar study more fascinating and, therefore, they have the determination to find a major role for grammar despite the fact that the skill-building (learning grammar and other skills) is a delayed gratification approach to language education (Krashen, 2004).

5. The presence of form-focused tests encourages curriculum designers to include more grammar study. In fact, direct instruction in grammar has resulted in modest gains even on test like performance and, moreover, consciously learned knowledge will fade away after a period of time (Krashen, 2003). The subjects who experienced comprehensible input easily outperformed traditionally taught students on form-based tests (e.g. Elley, 1991; Lee, Krashen and Gribbons, 1996).

3. The Output Hypothesis

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The output hypothesis claims that when a conversational partner fails to understand the transmitted message then learners may notice that they do not know to convey their intent. This "may prompt second language learners to recognize consciously some of their linguistic problems" (Swain, 2005, p. 474) and thus they will form what they think is a grammatically correct sentence in order to help the interlocutor understand the message.

Swain (2005) distinguishes three possible functions of the output hypothesis. She makes it very clear that the three functions are clearly related to conscious learning and not subconscious language acquisition (discussed in Ponniah & Krashen, 2008).

1. Noticing/triggering function. This function helps learners consciously recognize their linguistic problems.

2. Hypothesis testing function is the testing of consciously held hypothesis about language, grammar rules and specific vocabulary items. This function includes error correction.

3. Metalinguistic function refers to the conscious knowledge. Consciously learned knowledge is sometimes refers to as metalinguistic knowledge.

The Output Hypothesis is consistent with the Skill-Building Hypothesis. The former insists on inductive grammar learning and the latter on deductive learning. According to the skill-building theory, rules are first learned through direct grammar instruction and latter they are fine tuned through drills and exercises. The output hypothesis states that learners consciously recognize the linguistic problems and discover rules to solve the problems, and finally attempt to automatize the rules through fluency practice and error correction.

The output hypothesis states that "ouput may sometimes be… 'a trial run' reflecting" learners "hypothesis of how to say (or write) their intent (Swain, 2005, p. 474). According to Swain (2000), the speech production is scanned and evaluated using conscious knowledge to edit

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(modify) the output. In order to use rules successfully in second language performance, three conditions of the monitor hypothesis must be met. The second language users must:

1. Know the rule.
2. Be focused on form, or thinking about correctness.
3. Have time to apply the rules.

The following dialogue is the evidence supporting the claim that learners can edit (modify) the output only when the three conditions are met.

Sofie : Des nouveaux

Rachel : Cher[chez] nou[veaux], des nou[veaux] menaces.

Sofie : Good one! (Congratulating her friend for using the word menaces for problems)

Rachel : Yeah, nouveaux, des nouveaux, de nouveaux. (*new, 'des' new, 'de' new*) [checking which partitive form to use) Is it 'des nouveaux' or 'de nouveaux'?

Sofie : des nouveaux or des nouvelles? [masculine plural form of the adjective or feminine plural form]

Rachel : nou[veaux], des nou[veaux], de nou[veaux]

Sofie : It's menace, un menace, une menace, un menace, menace ay ay ay! [exasperated] (It's threat [the checking if 'threat' is masculine or feminine]

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Rachel: Je vais le pauser. (*I am going to put it on pause.)* [i.e., the tape recorder]. [They look it up in the dictionary]

Sofie: [triumphantly] C'est des nouvelles! (*It's des nouvelles'!)* [i.e., the feminine form]

Rachel: C'est feminin; des nouvelles menaces (It's feminine 'des nouvelles menaces'.)

(Kowal and Swain, 1997)

In the collaborative dialogue, Sofie uses the phrase 'des nouveaux' for 'de nouvelles'. Rachel consciously recognizes that the sentence is not well-formed and questioned about the use of the phrase 'des nouveaux'. In the course of the dialogue, they ignored the word 'des' and focused only on the correct use of the adjective, 'nouveaux' confirming that the condition 2 of the monitor hypothesis was met concerning the word 'nouveaux'. As the subjects did not know the correct usage (the rule), they looked up in the dictionary to discover the rule and finally they used the correct word 'nouvelles'. It is obvious that the condition 1 of the hypothesis was also met. The condition 3 was not an issue because there was no time constraint.

The participants focused on the word 'des' for a while but failed to substitute the correct word 'de' for 'des' because they did not either know the rule or engage in discovering the rule. This confirmed that the condition 1 was not met. It is also doubtful, if the condition 2 was met because the subjects could not continue to think about correctness of the word 'des'. The collaborative dialogue supports the monitor hypothesis that the three conditions must be met for the use of conscious knowledge in second language performance.

Studies (Kowal and Swain, 1997; Swain 2000) claim that the process of editing as the testing of hypothesis about language, which affects acquisition. However, the studies do not show that the collaborative dialogue results in language acquisition. In fact, the idea is correct with the monitor

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hypothesis that our conscious knowledge is used to edit the output sometimes before or sometimes after the utterance is produced (Krashen, 1981), which confirms that this process can make a small contribution to accuracy, and not fluency.

3.1. Error correction

The claim of the output hypothesis is that learners will acquire language when they 'consciously recognize' and correct errors while producing output. In fact, error correction is a form of inductive grammar learning, a process that encourages learners to adjust the consciously learned rule or to discover a rule if the rule is completely unknown to the learner, (Krashen 2002) using tools such as dictionary, grammar books etc. as suggested by Kowal and Swain (1997).

Error correction may create harmful effects on learners because the subjects are compelled to read incorrect sentences for correcting errors. If they cannot recognize and correct errors either by using consciously learned rules or by feel, they will subconsciously acquire the given incorrect structures while reading. Truscott (1996; 2005) asserts that error correction does not help learners improve accuracy. In fact, it may damage accuracy and therefore error correction should be abandoned.

4. Conclusion

What we can conclude from the study is the fact that both the deductive (the skill-building hypothesis) and the inductive (the output hypothesis) grammar instruction will help learners only to monitor the output and it will not contribute to the development of second language linguistic competence.

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