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How do the different grammar instructions affect the Acquisition of English relative pronouns of Korean EFL learners?

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This study examined how the different grammar instruction affect the acquisition of English relative pronouns of Korean EFL learners specifically focusing on low-level students. One hundred and four university students with low English proficiency level were participated in the study and assigned to the either deductive or the inductive grammar instruction groups. The participants' English grammar acquisition was checked through pre, post, and delayed tests. The results revealed that both of the instructions positively influenced on the learners' grammar acquisition for the long-term retention even though the learners in the deductive instruction group initially showed greater improvement in their L2 grammar knowledge.

1. Introduction

One of the ultimate goals of second language (L2) learning is to develop communicative competence in the target language. In order for L2 learners to cultivate communicative competence, developing grammatical competence is essential (Bachman, 1990; Brown, 2007b; Ellis, 1993; Larsen-Freeman, 1991) in that successful L2 learners could use their L2 not only appropriately but also accurately (Ellis, 1994, 2003; Robinson, 2001). Bardovi-Harlig (1999) mentions that for successful L2 learning, grammatical competence may not be a sufficient condition but it may be a necessary condition. A substantial body of research has proved the positive effects of grammar instruction on second language acquisition (SLA) (Ellis, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Selinger, 1983; Terrell, 1991).

Over the last couple of decades, quite a few studies have investigated whether grammar instruction has a role to play in SLA (DeKeyser, 2003; Ellis, 2002; Lee & Wang, 2002; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Even though previous research showed some benefits of L2 grammar instruction, the results were hardly generalizable to low level L2ers since most studies were carried out targeting intermediate or upper level students. Moreover, for university students with low proficiency level there is little research on the different teaching methods. Then, it would be meaningful to closely investigate whether different instructional types is indeed helpful to improve low level L2 learners' grammar acquisition as normally.

2. Literature review

2. 1. Inductive and deductive grammar instruction

Research on grammar instruction in L2 has concentrated on determining whether grammar should be taught at all. However, current research has led to a reconsideration of the role of grammar in SLA (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004). There are two representative teaching methods in L2 grammar instruction, namely deductive and inductive ways. Deductive teaching is when a grammatical structure is presented initially and then practiced in one way or another, while inductive teaching method is when learners are exposed to examples of a grammatical structure and are asked to find a metalinguistic generalization on their own. Fischer (in Nagata, 1997) distinguishes deductive instruction from inductive one, saying “a deductive approach may be required when the foreign language rule is dissimilar and of equal or greater complexity than the native language rule, while an inductive approach may be employed when the foreign language rule is similar or dissimilar but simpler than the native language (p. 521).” Thornbury (1999) explains a deductive (rule-driven) approach presents a rule and is followed by examples in which the rule is applied, while an inductive (rule-discovery) approach shows some examples from which a rule is inferred.

In regard to the characteristics of the deductive and inductive approaches, there are various explanations. A deductive approach not only gets straight to the point, and can therefore be time-saving but also respects the intelligence and maturity of many students, and acknowledges the role of cognitive processes in language learning (Thornbury, 1999). An inductive approach coincides with natural language acquisition and conforms more easily to the concept of interlanguage development, helping learners to find a communicative “feel” by allowing students to discover natural rules of language (Brown, 2007a).

2. 2. The effects of Inductive and deductive grammar instruction

A number of studies have examined the relative effectiveness of these two approaches and the results have been mixed (Ellis, 2006; see also Table 1). Some research discovers that a deductive approach was more effective (DeKeyser, 1995, 2003; Erlam, 2003; Norris & Ortega, 2000; Robinson, 1996). Others indicate a clear advantage for an inductive approach (Haight, Herron & Cole, 2007; Harmer, 1987; Herron & Tomasello, 1992). There is also some research showing no significant difference in the effectiveness of the two approaches (E- Ock, 2008; Rosa & O' Neill, 1999).

Table 1

Effects of the differential grammar instructions

| | Advantage | Target grammar |
|---------------------------------|--|---|
| Haight, Herron & Cole (2007) | inductive instruction | adverbial pronoun, indirect object pronouns, imperative pronouns, verb, relative pronouns, demonstrative pronouns, partitive articles |
| Erlam (2003) | deductive instruction | direct object pronouns |
| E-j Ock (2008) | inductive instruction deductive instruction | tense, article, preposition |

In addition, based on the complex results of differential grammar instruction, some researchers suggest that the effectiveness of teaching grammar depends on target grammar complexity (DeKeyser, 1995; Robinson, 1996; Nagata, 1997). The effectiveness of deductive and inductive instruction may differ for particular linguistic form. For example, while simple rules could best be taught deductively, more complex rules could be taught inductively (Ellis, 2006).

In order to examine how the different grammar instruction - deductive and inductive instruction- affect the acquisition of English relative pronouns of Korean EFL learners specifically focusing on low-level students, two research questions were formulated.

1. How do the different grammar instructions (deductive and inductive) affect the acquisition of English relative pronouns of Korean EFL learners on posttest?
2. How do the different grammar instructions (deductive and inductive) affect the acquisition of English relative pronouns of Korean EFL learners on delayed test?

3. Research Design

3. 1. Participants and instrument

The participants of this study were 104 college students with low English proficiency level enrolled an 'English grammar' course in a university located in Chonnam province. They consisted of 7 female students and 97 male students (age = 20~26)

Table 2
Distribution of the Participants

| Group | N | Female | Male |
|-----------|-----|----------|------------|
| Inductive | 56 | 4 (7.1%) | 52 (92.9%) |
| Deductive | 48 | 3 (6.3%) | 45 (93.7%) |
| Total | 104 | 7 (6.7%) | 97 (93.3%) |

The test with 20 target items and 40 filler items was designed to gauge the participants' knowledge of English relative pronouns, which was the target grammar of this study. Twenty target items were seven items of subject relative pronouns *who, which, that*, three items of object relative pronouns *whom, which, that*, four items of possessive relative pronouns *whose, of which*, one item of relative pronouns *what*, and five items of the usage of relative pronouns.

3.2. Procedures

The pretest was carried out to measure the participants' initial knowledge of relative pronouns and to see whether the two groups showed no significant difference in terms of their knowledge of relative pronouns from the beginning. Shortly after the pretest, the two groups received instruction on English relative pronouns four times — twice a week for two weeks — using different teaching methods. One group received instruction in a deductive way and the other group was taught inductively.

A fifty minute class time was allotted to both groups and different handouts were designed and used for each teaching session. In the inductive group, the participants were given handouts which included reading texts. The reading passages and questions were taken from *Reading Spark* Level 3, 4 (Langstar Publishing, 2009). The instructor read each sentence of the reading passage and translated it into Korean, and asked the group to solve comprehension questions. During the classes, the participants of the inductive group were taught concepts of relative pronouns implicitly, and were asked to guess the different usage through examples of passages and make sentences by using relative pronouns. In the deductive group, the participants also received handouts which included the concepts and examples of target grammar, and each class was spent for introducing and explaining the usages of relative pronouns explicitly. The participants of deductive group were taught the different concepts of relative pronouns first and the usages of relative pronouns with diverse examples.

After the two week experiment period, both groups took the posttest with the same items of the pretest. Then, to investigate the retention of learning, the delayed test was conducted. SPSS 17.0 for Window was used for the data analyses and the significance level was set at $\alpha < .05$, nondirectional.

4. Results and Discussion

I conducted a *t*-test to make sure whether the two groups were not different in terms of the knowledge of relative pronouns with the pretest results. The pretest consisted of a total 20 target items with one point each. The results showed that

there was no a significant difference between the two groups. Thus, we assumed that the groups were not different from each other initially.

Table 3
The Results of Group Comparison on Pretest

| Group | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>Sig</i> | Partial η^2 |
|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------|------------------|
| Inductive | 56 | 6.535 | 3.219 | .429 | -.655 | .514 | .006 |
| Deductive | 48 | 6.916 | 2.616 | | | | |

$p < .05$

After the two week experiment period, the two groups took the posttest using the same test as the previous one. To see whether or not the grammar instruction has an effect on the low-level college students' grammar acquisition, pre and post test scores were initially compared (see Table 4).

Table 4
The Results of Mean Differences on Pre and Post Tests

| Group | Pretest | | Posttest | | <i>t</i> | <i>Sig</i> | Partial η^2 |
|---------------------------|----------|-----------|----------|-----------|----------|------------|------------------|
| | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | | | |
| Inductive (<i>n</i> =56) | 6.535 | 3.219 | 8.142 | 3.266 | -4.731 | .000 | .169 |
| Deductive (<i>n</i> =48) | 6.916 | 2.616 | 9.479 | 3.451 | -6.278 | .000 | .295 |

$p < .05$

To better answer the first research question asking which grammar instruction could be more effective on L2 grammar acquisition focusing on low-level students, the posttest results of the two groups were compared. As can be seen in Table 5, the two groups' posttest scores were significantly different each other showing the performance of deductive group was better than that of inductive group.

Table 5
The Results of Group Comparison on Posttest

| Group | <i>N</i> | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>F</i> | <i>t</i> | <i>Sig</i> | Partial η^2 |
|-----------|----------|----------|-----------|----------|----------|------------|------------------|
| Inductive | 56 | 8.142 | 3.266 | .506 | -2.026 | .045 | .038 |
| Deductive | 48 | 9.479 | 3.451 | | | | |

$p < .05$

To answer the second research question, four weeks after the posttest, all the participants took the delayed test in order to see the long-term retention effects of the two grammar instructions. In Table 6, to investigate whether each instructional method has also positive effects on the learners' long term retention of the target grammar, the pretest and delayed test scores of each group were compared.

Table 6
The Results of Mean Differences on Pre and Delayed Tests

| Group | Pretest | | Delayed test | | t | Sig | Partial η^2 |
|------------------|---------|-------|--------------|-------|--------|------|------------------|
| | M | SD | M | SD | | | |
| Inductive (n=56) | 6.535 | 3.219 | 8.571 | 3.499 | -5.374 | .000 | .208 |
| Deductive (n=48) | 6.916 | 2.616 | 8.645 | 3.623 | -4.001 | .000 | .146 |

$p < .05$

From the findings, I could also say that teachers need to consider the whole instructional time before deciding the most appropriate teaching method considering their students' needs. For instance, if their (low-level) L2 students need to boost their grammar-related test scores within rather a short period, it would be better to use a deductive instructional approach.

The overall results demonstrate that low-level adult L2ers could get immediate help from the deductive grammar instruction partly because it is well matched to their maturity and cognitive level. However, this initial advantage was not sustained for long-term retention and both of the instructions were indeed helpful for low-level L2 college students. This is a pedagogically meaningful finding in that even low proficiency level adult L2ers could retain the target grammar information through formal grammar instruction for quite a long time, implying the benefits of grammar instruction not just for intermediate or advanced L2ers but also low-level ones.

5. Conclusion

This study examined how the different grammar instruction affect the acquisition of English relative pronouns of Korean EFL learners specifically focusing on low-level students. The results discovered that both of the inductive and deductive grammar instructions have positive effects on the L2 acquisition, implying that low level L2ers' grammar capacity could be significantly improved through grammar-based instruction. These are pedagogically meaningful findings considering that most L2ers study their L2 in institutional settings and they could actually enhance their L2 grammar capacity from diverse ways of grammar instructions in their own classrooms. Although the deductive grammar instruction was significantly better than the inductive grammar instruction when producing the immediate teaching effects for low-level L2 college students, both of the instructions were equally effective regarding the long-term retention. This finding suggests that the inductive grammar instruction may have delayed learning effects especially for the students with low English proficiency in the L2 field (Fotos, 1994; Haight, Herron & Cole, 2007; Reber, 1989).

This study was carried out with a rather small number of participants at a specific level of college students with specific target grammar, English relative pronouns. The results are, therefore, not generalizable to the entire population of L2ers, especially those of very young age or those with higher language proficiency. The results could be different if further research were

conducted with other samples.

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