

The Effect of Contrastive Phrase Re-Synthesis Instruction on Grammatical Accuracy: A Teachability Hypothesis Perspective

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

The role of phrases especially in a universal grammar (UG) sense and the presentation of grammar based on the lexical-functional grammar (LFG) in the form of C-structure rules (Thomann, 2002) and the role of phrase-based instruction in learning seem to be under-researched. Of particular relevance to this issue is the role of grammar instruction which has been very controversial in second language acquisition (SLA) literature (e.g., Ellis, 2008; Krashen, 1993; Pienemann, 1984). One famous view about the effectiveness of grammar teaching is the teachability hypothesis (TH) which proposes a hierarchy of six stages of syntactic acquisition which second language (L2) learners must pass through in the process of acquiring the grammar of a L2 (Pienemann, 1984). It states that instruction will be effective only if learners have developed the pre-requisite processing procedures for processing higher-level linguistic structures. Therefore, this study aims to answer the question of whether, despite the developmental constraints proposed by the TH, explicitly instructing L2 learners to recognize the concept, boundary, and structure of English phrases and the specific grammatical relationships and inter-relationships held by each phrase will enhance their grammatical accuracy in written and oral production and help them develop to the next, next + 1, and 2 stages.

2. Methodology

A total number of 37 female learners of English in a language institute participated in this study. They went through a series of pretests of oral and written processability theory (PT) stages until 23 learners who turned out to be homogeneous in phrase knowledge, written grammatical accuracy, and current PT stages were left. Finally,

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the learners were randomly assigned to one of the three groups: a contrastive experimental group (CEG, n = 9), an L2-only experimental group (L2EG, n = 7), and a comparison group (CG, n = 7). The Nelson English Language Test was used to measure participants' general English proficiency. Two Phrase Knowledge Tests were used to measure participants' knowledge of English phrases and two Written Affirmative Sentences Tests to check their writing accuracy on the pretest and posttest. Two equivalent Picture Differences Tests (adopted from Spada & Lightbown, 1999) were used to specify learners' current PT stages in oral production and, a Picture-Cued Written Scrambled Questions Test (adopted from Spada & Lightbown, 1999) was used to check their PT stages in writing. But an equivalent written scrambled test was developed for the posttest. After pretesting, the two experimental classes received the treatment as follows. The CEG was provided with contrastive L1-L2 meta-linguistic instruction about the concept, boundary, and structure of English NP, VP, and PP together with intra- and inter-phrasal parsing and phrase re-synthesis practice. The instruction lasted for 7 sessions (two hours each session) and focused on introducing the head and complement, structure, boundary, and configuration of English phrases together with the place and function of each phrase and inter-phrasal relationships in both affirmative and interrogative sentences. This treatment was replicated for the L2EG only in English language rather than being contrastive. The CG only received the focused task for meaning negotiation. After the treatment, participants were post-tested on English phrases, writing grammatical accuracy, and PT stages in oral and written production based on the exact assessment procedures on the pretest. Fisher's Exact Test was used to compare the percentage of learners in each group who had gained structures at the next, next + 1, and next +2 stages in oral and written production.

3. Discussion

With reference to theoretical assumptions and empirical findings about the role of phrases in linguistic knowledge and production, this study hypothesized that contrastive teaching of phrase configuration and function together with phrase re-synthesis practice would facilitate gaining the TH *next* and *next +1* or 2 stages, contrary to what the TH has proposed. In line with theoretical and empirical support for phrase-dependency of linguistic knowledge, this study showed that when learners develop the ability to recognize the structure and boundary of phrases, they will be able to learn different stages simultaneously because all of those stages share a common building block. The only condition which needed to be met was learning the interrogative word order which constituted the interrogative inter-phrasal parsing practice in this study. Overall, the results provided support for this hypothesis.

The results agree with those in Carrie (2012) and Spada, Lightbown, and White (2006) who found counter-evidence against the TH prediction that beyond the *next* stage cannot be acquired through instruction. The finding in this study that contrastive teaching and input significantly facilitated acquisition corroborate the results of Kupferberg (1995) and Kupferberg and Olshtain (1996) who found

that contrastive linguistic input and explicit contrastive instruction triggered noticing and contributed to achievement in both recognition and production tasks. The results in this study seem to be refuting the TH by indicating that developmental constraints are not insurmountable and instruction does not necessarily have to target the immediately *next* stage, as they have shown that instruction can facilitate advancing to *higher-than-next* stages. In other words, the results contradict Pienemann's (2005) view that "...the Teachability Hypothesis defines CONSTRAINTS on Teachability. It does not predict sufficient conditions for teaching to be successful" (p. 73), because there seem to be conditions which are likely to modify the effects of the constraints themselves. The results also support those in Farley and McCollam (2004) and Spada and Lightbown (1999) who found that readiness failed as a predictor of acquisition as *ready* learners did not develop to higher stages more than *unready* learners. In other words, the present study, in accordance with these two studies, indicates that developmental readiness is not the only factor determining acquisition, but instructional intervention also makes a difference.

Overall, both the contrastive and non-contrastive forms of instruction proved more effective than the treatment given to CG. However, taking the effects on phrase knowledge development, canonical word order and advancing to *next* + 1 and 2 TH stages in oral and written production, the contrastive form seemed to be the most effective form of treatment. However, one point of caution needs to be added, and it is the fact that small sample sizes and lack of a delayed posttest in this study may weaken our claims. But, it is likely that a longer treatment period might have contributed to even better results.

4. Conclusion

Contrary to the TH, the study encourages redefining the role of instruction as facilitating and the influence of developmental constraints as surmountable by using adequate means of instructional intervention. The results suggest that for L2 learners to succeed in acquiring the grammar of a second language they must develop an awareness of the structure of phrases. The ability to re-synthesize phrases from the flow of otherwise segmented words can contribute to their syntactic development. The study also reveals that provision of contrastive input and meta-linguistic instruction is more likely to help learners notice L2 particularities such as linguistic configuration of phrases by using the filter of their L1 knowledge.

Therefore, the general conclusion out of this study would be that phrase re-synthesis instruction and practice especially in its contrastive/comparative form is a useful technique for helping language learners acquire not only the *next* stage in the TH sense but also advance to higher stages as well. That is, by utilizing the right technique for teaching the grammar of a second language one need not be concerned too much about the constraints proposed by the TH.

Keywords: phrase re-synthesis; teachability hypothesis; stage gain; grammatical accuracy; contrastive teaching.

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