Consciousness-raising tasks: a learner perspective

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This paper reports on a study that was carried out to determine learners’ attitudes to learning grammar through the use of two types of consciousness-raising tasks. A deductive task provided explicit explanations of a grammar structure, while an inductive task required learners to discover the grammar rules for themselves. The study investigated learners’ preferences relating to deductive and inductive tasks, and aimed to provide a learner perspective of the effectiveness of such tasks. The results indicated that learners viewed both task types to be useful, and there was no obvious preference for one task type over the other.

Should grammar be taught?

The question of whether or not grammar should be taught has been persistently debated in the fields of language pedagogy and second language (L2) acquisition. Some researchers such as Krashen (1982) maintain that grammar is acquired naturally if learners are exposed to sufficient comprehensible input, and that it doesn’t need to be taught. Others hold an opposing view, calling for the inclusion of formal grammar teaching. White (1987), for example, claims that instruction is necessary, as some grammatical forms cannot be acquired simply through exposure alone. Larsen-Freeman (1995) points out that even if grammar is acquired naturally, it does not necessarily follow that it should not be taught. Instruction can enhance the acquisition of grammar, and help speed up the process.

Two approaches to teaching grammar

On the pedagogic front there exists a similarly persistent debate about how learners’ attention to grammar should be directed. While some practitioners, such as Sheen (1992), believe that a deductive approach, where the learners are explicitly taught the rules of particular features of the target language (TL), is the most effective means of teaching grammar, others, such as Bourke (1996) argue that an inductive approach, whereby learners are encouraged to look for regularities in the TL input and formulate rules for themselves, is a more successful method.

As Bourke states, deductive means of teaching grammar tend to emphasize form over meaning, and promote passive rather than active participation of the learners in the learning process. Bolitho and Tomlinson (1995) believe that such approaches may intimidate learners.
Instead, they argue that awareness-raising inductive approaches help to develop learners' own understanding of language, and to build confidence in themselves as learners. Furthermore, Ellis (1997) argues that allowing the learners to take responsibility for discovering the underlying patterns of the TL favourably affects retention.

**Consciousness-raising tasks**

Consciousness-raising (CR) tasks, which can be either deductive or inductive, offer an effective means of teaching grammar. Ellis (1997: 160) defines a CR task as:

> a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the TL.

It can be argued that all grammar activities can serve the purpose of making learners aware of and notice new language. Ellis differentiates CR tasks from other form-focused activities by stating that CR tasks de-emphasize learner production, and are not intended to lead to correct use of the targeted feature in spontaneous language use directly following task performance. Instead, he argues, the aim of CR tasks is to construct a conscious representation of the target feature, with production of that feature kept to a minimum.

**Potential for further research**

CR tasks have not yet been fully researched. However, it has been shown that inductive CR tasks, where learners are encouraged to discover grammar rules for themselves, are just as effective as deductive CR tasks, where the rules are formally explained and examples provided (Mohamed 2001).

However, few studies have investigated CR tasks from a learner perspective. As it is the learners who ultimately benefit from instruction—and using instructional material that appeals to them is essential—the study reported here was conducted to investigate learners' opinions about the use of deductive and inductive CR tasks in the teaching of grammar. In particular, the study aimed to answer the question: Which task type do learners prefer?

**The study**

**Participants**

Fifty-one ESL learners took part in the study. At the time of data collection, the learners were following language courses at a New Zealand tertiary institution. There were two classes at each of the following levels: lower-intermediate, intermediate, and upper-intermediate. For ease of reference, the three proficiency levels will be referred to throughout as Class 1 (lower-intermediate), Class 2 (intermediate), and Class 3 (upper-intermediate).

**Procedure**

A grammar structure suitable for each level of proficiency was chosen (relative clauses, negative adverbs, and ergative verbs), and a deductive and inductive CR task designed for each of these. The deductive tasks were designed to be performed individually, while the learners worked on the inductive tasks in pairs. The learners in each class were divided into two treatment groups, depending on which task type they performed. In total, 23 learners performed deductive tasks, and 28...
learners performed inductive tasks. Each learner completed only one task. A task evaluation questionnaire was administered to the learners after task completion to determine their attitudes towards the tasks.

The tasks

The deductive tasks were in two main parts. In the first part, learners were provided with language data in the form of syntactic rules or grammatical information. They were then invited to use this data to complete a language activity in the second part. The information presented in the inductive tasks was identical to that in the deductive tasks. The difference was that, rather than explaining the grammatical rules, the tasks required the learners to search for the rules themselves from the given data. Each of the inductive tasks contained an element of information gap to encourage learners to communicate and work together to solve the language problem. (See Appendices B, C, and D for examples.)

Task evaluation questionnaire

The task evaluation questionnaire was aimed at examining the learners’ attitudes towards, and opinions about, the tasks. It consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions, and invited learners to evaluate the task, explaining what they did/did not like about it, as well as what they felt they had learnt as a result of the task. (See Appendix A.)

Analysis

Responses to the Likert scale statements by the learners in the two treatment groups were added up separately to arrive at an aggregate score for each task type. These were then divided by the number of learners who performed each task type, and averaged to attain a mean response for each treatment group. A t test was also performed to determine if there were any statistically significant differences between the responses of the learners in the two groups. The learners’ responses to the open-ended questions where they were asked to explain what they liked/did not like about the task were categorized according to meaning.

Results

Knowledge of target structures before and after the tasks

The first question in the task evaluation section of the questionnaire required the learners to explain what they knew about the targeted grammar structure before doing the task, and the second question asked them to explain what they had learnt about the structure as a result of doing the task. Between 50–100% of the learners in each class claimed to have had no knowledge about the structure before task performance. After the task, the percentage of learners who maintained that they still had not learnt anything new about the target structure was less than 15%. Although only a few learners were able to state that they knew how to use the target structure after the task, the large majority of them were able to specifically mention something that they had learnt as a result of the task. For example, some learners in Class 1 claimed to have learnt prepositions as a result of the relative clause tasks that they performed.

Familiarity with structures and tasks

Over 70% of learners in each class regarded the targeted grammar structure as being new to them. The learners also had to state whether the kind of task that they performed was new to them. Their responses showed that 73.9% of the learners in the inductive group, and 71.4% of the learners in the deductive group, found the type of tasks to be new to them.
Task preferences

The responses showed that the learners generally viewed both task types positively. When their scores in each of the statements were totalled and averaged, this gave the inductive group a mean response of 2.91. That is to say, of the 28 learners who performed the inductive tasks, 73% agreed that the tasks were useful, interesting, clear, and easy to understand, helped them to learn more about how English works, and said that they would like to do more tasks of a similar nature. This is similar to the responses made by the deductive group, consisting of 23 learners. Their collective response to the task evaluation questions was 2.86. Therefore 72% of the learners in the deductive group were in favour of the tasks that they performed. Thus, as both groups’ responses were almost identical, no clear preference for a particular task type emerged from this analysis.

The results of the t test, performed to identify if any statistically significant differences existed between the task preferences of the two treatment groups, showed a similar outcome. Each statement about the task was responded to positively by both treatment groups, with each statement attaining a mean response of above 2.6. Both deductive and inductive tasks were thus seen to be effective, and there was no apparent preference for one task type over the other. The t test did not reveal any statistically significant differences between the evaluative responses of the two groups.

The learners’ views about the tasks can be seen in more detail from their responses to the two open-ended questions. Two uniform responses given by the learners in all three classes were that the tasks were easy to understand, and that it was a useful opportunity for them to learn new language. Examples of such comments included: ‘Very clear. In five minutes I have learnt something new’ and ‘The task helped me to learn new grammar and reminded me of some things I had forgotten.’ Of the learners who performed the inductive task, only a few learners in Class 3 liked the fact that it gave them the opportunity ‘to work with a friend’. None of the other classes mentioned this to be a particularly favourable feature of the inductive tasks. However, a number of learners who did the inductive tasks liked the fact that it gave them the chance to work out the rules for themselves without any intervention by the teacher. One learner, for example, commented that she ‘liked being asked to find the rule. It was a little difficult, but I did it and learned a lot.’ Rule discovery was seen to be a strong point in favour of the inductive tasks by learners of all three classes.

Both the inductive and deductive tasks in Classes 1 and 3 contained examples of correct and incorrect use of the targeted grammar point. A number of learners approved of this feature, commenting that it was helpful, as it allowed them to see the typical mistakes that learners make. The following is an example of such a comment: ‘You give both correct and incorrect examples. I think this is very good and helps to understand rules better and tells how to avoid mistakes.’ Many learners also commented that the examples were very helpful, and a few learners who did the deductive negative adverb task found the most positive feature of it to be its length: ‘Very short. I like that.’

A large number of learners did not respond to Question 7 (write one thing you did not like about the task). Of those who did respond, many commented...
on the length of the tasks, in particular saying that they were too long, and complaining that there was ‘too much to write.’ It is interesting to note that in the deductive group in Class 2, half of the learners who answered this question thought that the task was too long, while the other half felt that it was too short, and that it ‘did not give enough detail.’ Another point to note is that 25% of the learners who performed the inductive ergative verb task felt that it was too confusing, and that it was not explained well. One such comment was as follows: ‘Little bit difficult to understand and sometimes not clear about some information’. Many learners also commented that they had no particular dislikes or complaints about the tasks. This is most noticeable in Class 2, where one third of the learners commented that there was nothing that they disliked about the tasks.

An ANOVA was run to compare the responses of the learners to identify whether any differences existed between the responses of the three classes (i.e. the three proficiency levels). The analysis showed that no statistically significant differences existed between the responses of the three classes, thereby indicating that proficiency did not affect the learners’ views of the tasks.

**Discussion**

The evaluation of the CR tasks used for the study by the learners shows that the learners were generally receptive to them. The results indicate that the learners viewed the tasks to be useful in imparting new knowledge about the language. Their responses indicated that the tasks were effective learning tools, and that the learners viewed them to be so since they were able to state specific features of the structure that they had learnt as a result of having completed the tasks.

On comparing the two task types, the learners rated both types positively as being effective and enjoyable means of learning new language. Both groups of learners also agreed that they would like to do more tasks similar to the ones they had performed in the study. However, there appeared to be no strong preference for either task type.

A feature that distinguished the two task types was that one involved pair interaction while the other was meant to be carried out individually. However, only a small number of learners in Class 3 noted pair work to be a positive feature of the inductive task. In comparison, a much higher percentage of learners considered rule discovery to be a particularly good characteristic of all the inductive tasks. Rule discovery was, of course, the underlying feature of the inductive tasks. Such a response to the tasks suggests that it was the task itself that the learners approved of, rather than the fact that they performed the tasks individually or in pairs.

Based on the results of this study, proficiency does not appear to affect task preferences or attitudes to the task. A preference for a particular task type may be more to do with learning styles, with the more analytically oriented learners tending to prefer inductive tasks. As Ellis (1994) comments, the optimal type of instruction is likely to be related to one that matches the individual’s preferred approach to learning. The learners in this study display characteristics of different learning styles, and each learner’s individual ratings of the task he or she performed are likely to have been based on it.
Conclusions

Two general conclusions that can be drawn from this are:

1 Learners do not appear to have a strong preference for a particular task type, and see both as being equally useful.

2 Proficiency does not seem to affect task preference.

However, it is difficult to state conclusively whether the differences observed between the three classes were due to a result of the varying levels of proficiency or to the differences in the tasks and the structures they employed. It should also be noted that the fact that the two task types were performed differently (i.e. inductive tasks in pairs, and deductive tasks individually) may have affected the results of the statistical analyses. Furthermore, it must be recalled that the participants of the study were all adult learners in an ESL context. Care needs to be taken in generalizing the results obtained here as they may vary depending on the context of the learning situation and the age of the learners. Age, it would appear, is likely to affect task preferences.

This examination of CR tasks suggests that both deductive and inductive tasks are effective learning tools that could be used in the language classroom to make learners aware of form, where explicit instruction is necessary. Less experienced and lower-level learners would need to be introduced gradually to them, to help them gain an understanding of how to best utilize them. This does not imply that these tasks alone are sufficient. They would need to be used in conjunction with other varieties of tasks in order to cater for all learning styles and needs of the learners, and to create an environment which is conducive to the acquisition of both form and meaning.

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References

Larsen-Freeman, D. 1995. ‘On the teaching and learning of grammar: challenging the myths’ in Eckman et al. (eds.).


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Appendix A

Task evaluation questionnaire

You have just completed a task on a specific grammatical structure. What did you know about the structure before doing the task?

What new information (if any) have you learnt about this structure now?

Was this type of structure new to you?  Yes  ☐  No  ☐  
Was this type of task new to you?  Yes  ☐  No  ☐

Rate the following statements according to the scale by writing the appropriate number in the box:

1  Strongly Disagree  2  Disagree  3  Agree  4  Strongly Agree
i)  The task was useful.  ☐
ii) The task was interesting.  ☐
iii) The task was clear and easy to understand.  ☐
iv) The task helped me understand more about how English works.  ☐
v) I would like to do more tasks like this one.  ☐

Write one thing you liked about the task.

________________________________________________________________________________________

Write one thing you did not like about the task.

________________________________________________________________________________________
Appendix B

Direct Task for Relative Clauses

Read the following information about using relative clauses. Then make sentences of your own. The relative clause in each example is in italics. The prepositions are underlined. The relative pronoun is in bold.

A  If the relative pronoun is “which” or “whom”, the preposition can be used either at the front of the clause or at the end of the clause.

Example:  The house in which we live is pink. (Correct)
          The house which we live in is pink. (Correct)
          That is the person from whom I got the letter. (Correct)
          That is the person whom I got the letter from. (Correct)

Now write one sentence of your own, using this rule.

B  The preposition cannot be used both at the front of the pronoun and at the end of the clause in the same sentence.

Example:  The girl to whom you gave the message to is not here. (Incorrect)
          The girl whom you gave the message to is not here. (Correct)
          The girl to whom you gave the message is not here. (Correct)

Now write one sentence of your own using this rule.

C  If the relative pronoun is “who” or “that”, the preposition cannot be placed in front of it, but will need to be used at the end of the clause.

Example:  The man at whom I shouted is deaf. (Incorrect)
          The man whom I shouted at is deaf. (Correct)
          The place about that Jenny spoke is Singapore. (Incorrect)
          The place that Jenny spoke about is Singapore. (Correct)

Now write one sentence of your own, using this rule.

D  Remember not to repeat pronouns in a relative clause.

Example:  These are the books about which I told you it. (Incorrect)
          These are the books about which I told you. (Correct)
          The man who you were talking to him is my uncle. (Incorrect)
          The man who you were talking to is my uncle. (Correct)

Now write one sentence of your own using this rule.
Appendix C

Indirect Task for Relative Clauses: task sheet for student A

STUDENT A

A Look at the table below. The relative clauses are in italics, the prepositions are underlined and the relative pronouns are in **bold**.

B You need to work with your partner to complete the table. Ask your partner to read out his/her sentences. Listen carefully, then write them down in the appropriate column in your table.

C Talk about the sentences. Why are the sentences in the second column incorrect?

Complete the rules in the final column by filling in the blanks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Incorrect</th>
<th>Explanation of incorrect sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1 | The place **to which** you will want to go is Singapore.  
The place **which** you will want to go **to** is Singapore.  
The man **at whom** I shouted is deaf.  
The man **whom** I shouted **at** is deaf. | | Don’t use prepositions both at the _____________ and at the _____________ of the clause. |
| 2 | | The girl **to whom** we gave the message is not here.  
The house **in that** we live is pink. | Don’t use prepositions at the _____________ of the clause. |
| 3 | These are the books **which** I told you **about**.  
The man **who** you were talking to is my uncle. | | Don’t use personal pronouns at the _____________ of the clause. |

D Now write down a sentence of your own for each of these rules.

1 ____________________

2 ____________________

3 ____________________
Indirect Task for Relative Clauses: task sheet for student B

STUDENT B

A Look at the table below. The relative clauses are in italics, the prepositions are underlined and the relative pronouns are in **bold**.

B You need to work with your partner to complete the table. Ask your partner to read out his/her sentences. Listen carefully, then write them down in the appropriate column in your table.

C Talk about the sentences. Why are the sentences in the second column incorrect? Complete the rules in the final column by filling in the blanks.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Correct</th>
<th>Incorrect</th>
<th>Explanation of incorrect sentences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>That is the person <strong>from whom</strong> I got the letter <strong>from</strong>. The book <strong>in which</strong> you wrote <strong>in</strong> is mine.</td>
<td>Don't use prepositions both at the _______________ and at the ______________ of the clause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>The girl <strong>who</strong> we gave the message <strong>to</strong> is not here. The house <strong>that</strong> we live <strong>in</strong> is pink.</td>
<td>Don't use prepositions at the ______________ of the clause.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>These are the books <strong>which</strong> I told you <strong>about</strong> them. The man <strong>who</strong> you were talking <strong>to</strong> him is my uncle.</td>
<td>Don't use personal pronouns at the ______________ of the clause.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

D Now write down a sentence of your own for each of these rules.

1 ____________________

2 ____________________

3 ____________________