

Noticing the Other Gap : A Cross-linguistic Approach

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Noticing the Other Gap: A Cross-linguistic Approach

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Abstract

The main topic of this paper is what is known as "the noticing hypothesis." It usually refers to intra-linguistic approaches to second language learners' noticing the gap between what forms they are able to use and what forms they need to use in the target language. This paper, however, claims that it is more effective to take a cross-linguistic approach to the gap between the learners' way of thinking in their first language and the way of expressing things in the target language.

An experiment was carried out in order to compare the effectiveness of the intra-linguistic and the cross-linguistic approaches. The control group received instructions in the intra-linguistic approach and the experimental group in the cross-linguistic approach. The comparison of improvement in both groups after the experimental lessons showed that the experimental group was slightly better. Further studies are necessary to claim that the cross-linguistic approach to noticing the gap is more effective.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, Consciousness raising, Focus on form, Noticing

1. Introduction

There have been many discussions about whether formal instruction in a classroom setting facilitates the acquisition of a second language or not. Norris and Ortega (2000) reviewed and examined voluminous studies on the effectiveness of formal instruction under many different conditions published from 1980 through 1998. The results show that there is sufficient evidence that such instruction is generally effective. One question here is, "What types of formal instruction, then, are more effective than others?" The main topic of this paper is what is known as "the noticing hypothesis."

2. Preceding Studies

Schmidt and Frota (1986), and Schmidt (1990) proposed the importance of "noticing" in second language acquisition. Schmidt and Frota (1986) examined the diaries of a learner of Portuguese as the second language. They traced what structural features of the second language the learner "noticed" from the input he received, and claimed that there was a significant correlation between the learner's output and the structural features that he noticed. Schmidt (1990) studied different types of consciousness concerning language

learning, and claimed that attention to the target language forms was necessary for acquisition; these forms will not be acquired unless they are "noticed." Schmidt (1995) also pointed out that noticing the "gap" between what forms the learner are able to use in the second language and what forms s/he actually needs to use is a necessary condition of acquisition of the target forms.

To summarize the pedagogical implications of these studies, (1) teachers of a second language need to provide the learners with rich input in which they can find the structural features of the target forms, and at the same time they can understand the meanings that those forms express, (2) teachers should design instructional techniques to let the learners consciously pay attention to those structural features, and (3) teachers should let the learners notice the gap between what forms should be used and what forms they are able to use at present.

3. The Present Study

With regard to what types of formal instruction are effective in second language acquisition, these preceding studies seem to lead to "intra-linguistic" approaches. The present study, however, claims that it is worthwhile to pay attention to noticing the gap between the learners' way of

thinking in their first language and the structural features of the target forms in the second language. In other words, it proposes the effectiveness of a “cross-linguistic” approach to noticing the gap.

In the case of the experiment carried out for this study, the first language (hereafter abbreviated as “L1”) of the learners is Japanese and the target language (hereafter abbreviated as “L2”) is English. In order to express the same state of affairs, speakers of L1 Japanese may use a human subject for the sentence, while speakers of L1 English may use a non-human subject. Another example is, while speakers of L1 Japanese may use the verb in the active voice, speakers of L1 English may use the verb in the passive voice. There are some gaps between the Japanese way of thinking and the English way of expressing things. These gaps cause negative language transfer for the learners’ productive skills in English (Nagai 2004).

Admitting that noticing intra-linguistic gaps facilitates the learners’ acquisition, it is not sufficient because there can be language transfer from L1. The hypothesis in the present study is, it is more effective to let the learners notice “the cross-linguistic gap” between the way of thinking in L1 and the way of expressing in L2.

4. The Experiment

In order to verify the above hypothesis, an experiment was carried out. The subjects were 17-year-old students of a college of technology learning English as the second language. Their proficiency in English is supposed to be about average for second-year students in high schools. The targets in the lessons were (1) use of non-human subjects in the sentences with human objects in them, and (2) the distinction between the active/passive voice of the predicate verbs.

4.1. The Pre Test

Two groups, the control group and the experimental group were designed. Before the experimental lessons, a pre test was carried out for both groups. The test was to measure their knowledge of the two targets in a free composition task. Their task was to listen to the instructor’s sentences in Japanese, put them into English and write them down. The full score for each question was 3 points and there were 8 questions, so the full score for the total test was 24 points. As the results in Table 1 show, the proficiency of the two groups, as far as the targets of the lessons were

concerned, was almost the same (See Table 2 for the criteria for scoring).

Table 1 Scores of the Pre Test

	Control (n=15)	Experimental (n=14)
Mean	8.33	8.36
SD	5.16	5.72

Table 2 Criteria for Scoring

Evaluation	Points
Semantically relevant and Grammatically correct	3
Semantically relevant and grammatically incorrect but understandable	2
Semantically irrelevant but grammatically correct	1
Semantically irrelevant and grammatically incorrect	0

4.2. The Experimental Lessons

Two weeks of experimental lessons were given to both groups (control/experimental). The learners were given English composition exercises with different emphases using different materials (See Appendix). For the control group, an intra-linguistic approach to noticing the gap was taken, and for the experimental group, a cross-linguistic approach was taken. The procedures were as follows, and the differences of emphases are summarized in Table 3.

Procedures for the Control Group

1. The learners wrote compositions without grammatical assistance from the instructor.
2. The instructor showed the model compositions containing the target structures, and the learners compared them and their compositions.
3. The learners worked on application practices requiring the target structures based on the model compositions.

Procedures for the Experimental Group

1. The instructor first gave lectures on the gap between the Japanese way of thinking and the English way of expressing.
2. The instructor provided the learners with the check

points with which to avoid making mistakes resulting from the gap; choice of human/non-human subjects and choice of active/passive voices.

3. The learners worked on composition practices requiring the target structures consulting the check points.

Table 3 Different Emphases in the Experimental Lessons

Group	Emphases
Control	Comparison of the learners' compositions and the model compositions. Application exercises based on the models.
Experimental	Lecture on the gap between L1 way of thinking and L2 way of expressing. Composition exercises based on "the check-points."

4.3. The Post Test

After the experimental lessons, a post test was carried out to measure the effects of the lessons; to what extent the target structures had been acquired. The contents of the test and the criteria for scoring were the same as the pre test. The results of the test are shown in **Table 4** in comparison with the results of the pre test.

Table 4 Comparison of the Scores of the Pre Test and the Post Test

	Control (n=15)	Experimental (n=14)
Pre Test		
Mean	8.33	8.36
SD	5.16	5.72
Post Test		
Mean	9.67	9.93
SD	5.26	6.06

5. Conclusion

To compare the improvement in the post test compared to the pre test, the control group became 16% better, while the experimental group became 19% better. Evaluating this difference in the improvement, we can only claim that the effect of the cross-linguistic approach to noticing the gap is

slightly greater than that of the intra-linguistic approach. Further studies are required to reach a conclusion regarding whether there is a significant difference between the effects of the intra-linguistic and the cross-linguistic approaches to noticing the gap.

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Appendix Teaching Materials for Both Groups (excerpts)

The Control group

和文英訳例: 与えられた英訳例を参考にして、以下の日本語を英訳しなさい。

これらの写真を見ると沖縄の文化がわかるでしょう。 →These pictures will show you the culture of Okinawa.
ぼくは車で5分ほどでこのデパートに着きました。 →A five minutes' drive brought me to this department store.
コンサートではとても興奮した。 →I was very excited at the concert.

練習問題: 例を参考にして英訳しなさい。

この番組を見るとその国の歴史がわかります。→
そのニュースに僕らにはとてもショックを受けた。→
歩いて20分ほどで我々はこの公園に着きました。→

The Experimental group

間違いやすい英作文のチェックポイント

	日英語ギャップ
彼女の手紙のおかげで彼は不幸になった。 →Her letter made him unhappy.	無生物主語・能動態/受動態・特になし
ぼくは車で5分ほどでこのデパートに着きました。 →A five minutes' drive brought me to this department store.	無生物主語・能動態/受動態・特になし
コンサートではとても興奮した。 →I was very excited at the concert.	無生物主語・能動態/受動態・特になし

練習問題: まず要注意点にチェックマークをしてから、次の文を英訳しなさい。

	要注意点にチェックマーク!
この番組を見るとその国の歴史がわかります。→	無生物主語・能動態/受動態・特になし
あの映画のおかげでみんな幸せな気分になった。→	無生物主語・能動態/受動態・特になし
歩いて20分ほどで我々はこの公園に着きました。→	無生物主語・能動態/受動態・特になし