CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

This action research is the product of my rethinking about the way I had gone about teaching my students the simple be-passive. Despite my attempts to make the way I teach this grammar feature more processable and easier to remember, the students continued to lapse into errors of this nature. It seemed to me that perhaps I should rethink my whole approach to grammar teaching. Perhaps I should not do so much "telling" and give so much explanation, perhaps I should turn the table on them and get them to explain the be-passive instead.

This action research set out to investigate whether tasks designed to "reveal" the simple be-passive would help a class of Form 4 students gain insight into the form and usage of the grammar feature concerned. It also sought to find out how it had helped or not helped.

Revealing is a term used by Cazden (1993) to refer to any pedagogical activity used by the teacher which lead students towards guided enquiry.

Summary of Findings

Ten lessons were carried out over a period of two and a half weeks. During the lessons the students were given handouts and tasks, designed to reveal the be-passive form and usage. I used the macro-micro-macro approach; where I

first designed tasks that would stimulate the students to look at the over-all form and usage of the be-passive. The objectives of the next few tasks were to help the students focus at segments of the be-passive; the subject-auxiliary agreement, the use of the past participle form of verb. This is finally followed by the use of the passive voice at the inter-sentential level; the need for consistency in tense used throughout the description.

Several pieces of exercises designed to get feedback on how much the students knew of the be-passive were distributed at different strategic intervals over the duration of the action research. These included an initial piece of description of a process students wrote at the beginning of the study(Attempt 1a), its two recursive corrected pieces, (Attempt 1b and 1c), Handout 6 where all the five errors the students were taught to avoid were inserted into a passage describing a process to check if they were able to identify and correct the errors. Finally, there was Attempt 2 where the students described how bottles are recycled using the be-passive.

Tasks designed in this Action Research to "reveal" the form and usage of the simple be-passive proved to be helpful to my students to gain further insights on the structure. The number of errors they made in the writing of be-passive sentences to describe a process dropped drastically at the end of the study. (See Table 1, p. 52)

Equally important to the question of whether tasks that reveal grammatical features were helpful was the question of how the students processed grammatical features, how they made sense of the English grammar they encountered.

While not making any claim, the approach, using closed tasks to help

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reveal to the students the be-passive features and usage had been found to be effective.

Long (1990) hypothesized that closed tasks "elicit more topic and language recycling, more feedback, more incorporation, more rephrasing, more precision" and so on.(p.45) These are likely to lead to provision and incorporation of feedback which would inturn lead to what he termed "interlanguage destabilization". Evidence from the transcripts of the students group discussion supports this.

Instead of calling it "interlanguage destabilization", I have termed it "problematizing". When confronted by the following three situations, the students were thrown into a dilemma or problematic situation:

a. when they were asked to describe the language feature of the input given

b. when an error was inserted into language they had to process thus upsetting their intuitive feel towards the language

c. when a grammatically correct structure was pitted against the students' incorrect notion of that aspect of grammar

Confronted by such situations, the students worked towards resolving the problem. They were observed to employ various strategies:

a. They paid close attention to the input given and tried to search out grammatical patterns and evidence to support their hypotheses of how the structure is formed.

b. They employed grammatical reasoning.

c. They drew upon their knowledge of other language features and transferred

them into the English Language situation.

d. They also resorted to translating the input to be processed into a language they were more proficient in. It was noticed that the language they used, Bahasa Malaysia approximated the English Language more than their mother tongue.

e. The students did a lot of peer teaching.

These strategies they employed enabled them to describe the be-passive structure and facilitated their ability to understand how the form is linked to meaning. Having cognitively processed the target language the students were noticed to be able to avoid the errors they had made prior to the study. Comparisons of the number of errors found in students' description of a process before and after the study showed that the focus on the form and usage of the be-passive had been helpful in giving them a more precise awareness of the rules of use of the be-passive.

A very important factor that led to this success was the interactive process which was made possible by the group discussions. It entailed that the students do some interactive work to arrive at a set of answers. It was this process that gave rise to the various strategies employed.

While the tasks had set out to stimulate in the students an awareness of the target form of the be-passive, the grammatical reasoning they resorted to most of the time, showed that form and meaning were processed simultaneously. It was not possible to separate the two into two discrete entities to be dealt with separately. Similarly, it was also noticed that problematizing and clarifying or resolving went hand in hand.

The tasks and strategies I employed were however, not without some weaknesses. The input given was not sufficient to enable the students to get a larger picture of the usage of the be-passive. The recursive correction as a form of feedback on the progress of the students proved to be tiresome for them and this had interferred with the validity of the results from especially, Attempt 1c.

Tasks designed to reveal language features to students were found to be very time-consuming; the students must be given ample time to process the input.

Designing effective tasks was no simple matter. A lot of thought, anticipation of problem areas must be put into it and this factor may deter many teachers as time and energy are limited.

When the responsibility of learning is put in the students' hands, the teacher, to a certain extent, loses control as it would be impossible for the teacher to monitor every student or group. The students may end up picking up the wrong notions.

Implications

This study has given me some insights into language teaching.

Students should, from time to time, be invited to think about grammatical or even linguistic implications. It would help them understand and remember the features better too. However, to ensure that they give it serious thought, I must problematize that aspect I want them to learn.

The students, should be given the opportunity to take responsibility for

their own learning. By working out grammatical features for themselves will also help them develop their thinking capacity, build up their confidence and take responsibility for dealing with grammer. In this way, they will be less reliant on the teacher to explain grammar features to them.

I should also not feel too guilty about using translation; pointing out similarities and differences between the first language and the target language can be a great help in the learning process.

One should of course not overdo it and spend too much time teaching about the language. Using the language in a variety of communicative activities must remain a central goal. The class should only be invited to observe language features at work in the text only after they have communicated about the content of the text.

Limitations of This Action Research

I realise that in describing a process, a student requires more than the be-passive structure. They also need to know other types of passive structures to enable them to vary their sentences and make their description more interesting. This limitation was however unavoidable as extending it any further would make this action research too large to handle.

As the study was an action research which aimed to find out if "revealing" would be a good alternative to grammar teaching, I did not attempt to control group composition or monitor group interaction. I also did not delve into the

reasons for the glaring difference between the students' performance in Handout 6 and Attempt 2 as I had not taped the group discussions of Handout 6 as requested by the students.

The transcripts of the group discussions were very rich but I did not try to analyse it for anything beyond the aim of this study, to throw light on how the tasks had helped or not helped.

This action research only sought to investigate whether tasks designed to "reveal" the be-passive to a class of students were successful in developing insight on the be-passive and how it had helped.