

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0 Introduction

This chapter states the background, purpose, and significance of this study. Statement of the problem and operational definitions of terms are also stated here.

1.1 Background to the study

As the primary goal of current language instruction has become the acquisition of language for the purpose of communication, there have been many changes in L2 instruction over the past two decades. The major change is the shift from an explicit focus on language itself (as practised in traditional language teaching) to an emphasis on the expression and comprehension of meaning through language (as being practised in communicative language teaching).

This change has resulted in teachers becoming more tolerant of errors in learners' speech and overall performance in the target language as communicative language teaching puts emphasis on fluency without accuracy, that is, as long as L2 learners can communicate in the target language, grammatical errors can be ignored. That is why nowadays grammar is not taught explicitly in any communicative syllabus. For example, in our country, Malaysia,

the *English Language Syllabus for Secondary Schools* under Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (KBSM or Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools) is also very much communicative-based and grammar is supposed to be taught in context along with the four language skills and never to be taught in isolation or in discrete (p. 6, 1988).

These pedagogical shifts were a result of the theory that learners can develop greater L2 communicative abilities through instruction that is more like the characteristics of a "natural" environment. It has been argued by Krashen (1982, 1985) and others that if learners manage to get enough exposure to the language, such approaches can ultimately lead to mastery of the target language in much the same way that a child's first language gradually comes to match that of the environment.

It is true that there is some evidence that communicative language teaching does help learners achieve better fluency and communicative confidence in the L2 than approaches that are exclusively or primarily focus on language itself (that is, grammar, phonology, and vocabulary). Also, Higgs and Clifford (1982) have mentioned that high levels of accuracy or native-like language use can not be achieved by adolescent or adult learners whose experience in the L2 is limited to such "natural contexts".

Research done on Canadian French immersion programmes have provided some evidence that communicative language teaching does not necessarily lead to grammatical accuracy. These programmes are referred to by Krashen (1984, as cited in Lightbown and Spada, 1989) as "communicative programmes par excellence" since the focus is almost exclusively on meaning through subject-matter instruction rather than on the form of the language itself.

Montgomery and Eisenstein (1985) support the argument that a "combination of form-oriented and meaning-oriented language teaching was more beneficial than form-oriented teaching alone." Studies done by Harley, Allen, Swain, and Cummins (1990) have also drawn similar conclusions.

"Is the learner ready to learn the structure yet?" seems to be the theory behind Piennemann's argument (1985). His Teachability Hypothesis (1984b) claims that the effectiveness of instruction depends on whether a structure is learnable for an individual learner. His experimental work has emphasised learners' progression from one developmental stage to another (1985, 1987, 1988). In his theory, instruction can not guarantee the achievement of high accuracy in learners who are not motivated to achieve high-level skills, but motivated learners may be able to improve their accuracy within their developmental stage.

When is focus on form most beneficial to learners? This question was explored by Tomasello and Herron (1988, 1989). The findings suggest that the timing of form focus is equally important to that of the techniques used in teaching or correcting grammatical points.

To sum up, I now have some idea of which approaches improve L2 acquisition and which are useless attempts. But research results have been inconclusive and sometimes contradictory. Thus, more research, especially teacher research, is required in the L2 classroom to find out how form-focused instruction works (if it works at all) among college students in a Malaysian context.

Since most research on form-focused instruction done previously were either on oral English or at sentence level, very few have been conducted on writing, there is a need to find out the links between form-focused instruction and the texts produced by students.

1.2 Statement of the problem

My personal opinion is that mastery of grammar is important in the teaching of writing because grammatical accuracy is also taken into consideration when an essay is evaluated and awarded a score in the examination. In the college where I teach, teachers (including myself) marking essays for examination purposes use the college Marking Scheme for Writing. This scheme

gives due consideration to content, grammatical accuracy and effectiveness of an essay. At classroom level, too, we use this scheme as a guide as we feel that our classroom practices should synchronize with examination practices.

While working on the Applied Linguistics course at University of Malaya, I read an article on form-focused instruction as I did my assignment in the library. The theories and research in this area intrigued me, and I decided to try this approach in my own classroom. Using form-focused instruction with my Foundation Business students here was my first try and I found that in all three situations, my students had mixed abilities.

As I started the new semester in May this year, I had several objectives for my foundation classes. One of them was I wanted the students to improve on grammar in their writing, especially verb tenses. This was because students' previous writing showed that they had committed many grammatical errors (especially verb tense errors) although the content of their writing was good.

A look at the college marking scheme for writing tells me that language is an important criteria in the assessment of student writing. Students can lose marks easily if they are weak in grammar. Since students seemed to have the substance / content to write about, I decided to focus on language.

Furthermore, I always believe that as an ESL teacher, I need to provide explicit instruction and controlled practice besides providing opportunities for authentic language use in communicative language teaching. This is because students need to know and use grammar correctly in writing. Even the marking scheme for continuous writing (Paper Two) in English 1119 conducted by the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate emphasizes accurate Standard English (p.11) where accuracy of language is of utmost importance in awarding a good grade to candidate's writing (p.12-13).

Elliot (1991) has said that a necessary pre-condition of action research is a "felt need" (can be a concern, or an urge) on the part of the teachers to initiate change and innovation. It was this feeling that activated my inquiry and reflection. In this case, I have a need to help my students improve their writing (at least in terms of verb tense accuracy). Through reflections, I felt that I need to change the way grammar was taught (i.e. implicitly) to explicit form-focused. I believed that by doing so, students' writing would be improved to a certain extent and hopefully my own teaching practice would be improved, too. Therefore, my research question would be : Does form-focused instruction result in better L2 writing?

1.3 Purpose of the study

The purpose of this exploratory study was an attempt to examine the effects of form-focused instruction on L2 writing. Specifically, I wanted to find out if

form-focused instruction result in better L2 writing in terms of some aspects of grammatical accuracy in this case. Most importantly, I wanted to improve my own teaching practice in class.

1.4 Operational definitions of terms

Below is a list of terms that I used in this study and their respective operational definitions.

L2 : In Malaysia, it refers to English as it has become the second official language since 1970. Some people prefer to call it ESL, that is, English as a Second Language.

Form-focused instruction : refers to explicit teaching of grammar items in a communicative language class, not meant for students to explore or "acquire" on their own.

Writing : refers to essay / composition writing.

Grammatical error / mistake : refers to wrong use of grammatical items in student writing, particularly verb tenses.

SPM / MCE : Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia / Malaysia Certificate of Education. The grading system for an individual subject is as follow : A1 = high distinction, A2 = distinction, C3 to C6 = credit, P7 = pass, P8 = low pass and F9 = fail.

UEC / SM3 : stands for Unified Examination Certificate / Senior Middle Three, which is a Taiwanese university entrance examination conducted by all the

Chinese Independent High Schools in Malaysia.

KBSM : Stands for Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah (Integrated Curriculum for Secondary Schools).