CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

5.0 Introduction

In this concluding chapter, a discussion of the findings, limitations and implications of the study as well as directions for further research are presented.

5.1 Discussion

This study took the form of a classroom research design. It attempts to use the principles of action research. Some have termed it teacher research (Freeman, 1988). Whatever it is called is not important because a rose by any other names smells just as sweet.

Donald Freeman (1988) defines a typical action research cycle in teaching as follows. The teacher-researcher identifies an issue or problem (in this case, accurate use of verb tenses in composition), intervenes in the classroom setting to address that problem in some way (I tried a different approach in grammar teaching), and then assesses the impact of the intervention (I administered and analysed post writing tests and asked for student feedback).

The study was to find out if form-focused instruction is effective in improving L2 students' writing. Unlike most teachers who concentrated on the content of the written pieces when they intervened in student writing, I focused on grammar because my students' previous writing showed good content but they were weak in grammar, especially verb tenses. Since students have ideas on what to write, it was only right that I concentrated on language. This was my rationale for focusing on form instead of content.

The positive results of form-focused instruction in this study support explicit grammar teaching to some extent, especially teacher-fronted instruction. The notion that students can acquire grammar rules in context and then use them appropriately later in communication is being challenged. In fact, most students cannot internalise grammar rules by groping in the dark. They need guidance from teachers to open their eyes to see the rules and learn to apply them appropriately (in this case, writing). Therefore, classroom teachers should reflect and plan actions / strategies to get students learn and use correct grammar in their writing as well as daily communication.

I always believe that grammatical accuracy reflects a great deal on students' writing ability. Grammatical accuracy (especially verb tenses) in writing was the major issue for me in this study. However, I think my preoccupation with grammar has not overshadowed the writing task itself because students did enjoy their writing task during the intervention as shown on the student feedback forms.

Therefore, the form-focused instruction lessons that I gave did not give students the impression that language forms rather than how language functioned that was important. I do hope that the need to achieve grammatical accuracy in their essays have not made the students view writing as a grammatical exercise. And, in future, they will be more aware of verb tenses when they write so as to reduce verb tense errors, and hence produce better quality essays.

In the process of intervention in the first round of my study, I have experienced what Stronach (1986) called "generative action research" which enables a teacher-researcher to address many different problems at one time without losing sight of the main issue. She maintains that 'action research should offer the capacity to deal with a number of problems at the same time by allowing the spirals to develop spin-off spinals, just as in reality one problem will be symptomatic of many other underlying problems' (cited in McNiff, 1988: 44). The main issue that I was dealing with in the first round was simple present tense. Other problems that cropped out were subject-verb agreement as well as singular and plural nouns. I had to deal with the "side issues" without losing sight of the main issue of the inquiry (please refer to p.4-5 of my journal in Appendix VII).

5.2 Limitations of the study

There are a number of limitations in my small study. Firstly, the study used a classroom research design that was done purely by one teacher alone. There was no collaboration involved, as I could not get another teacher to observe me throughout the project. Thus, there was a possibility that researcher's bias might have occurred. However, I have made every effort to present and interpret data systematically using a consistent analysis as well as to utilise interview data and student feedback so that the incidence of researcher's bias was eliminated or reduced.

Secondly, the number of subjects involved in this project was small. Only 18 students in one college were used as subjects of the study for a total of three rounds (the sample size for each round was six), each round comprised two 2-hour of instruction. It would therefore be unwise to generalise the findings of this study. However, the purpose of my small research project was not so much on establishing generalisation nor proving hypothesis, it was to improve my own practice and consequently, improve the student writing ability.

5.3 Significance and implications of the study

Having acknowledged the limitations of the classroom research data, I can nevertheless confirm that focus on form seems to have been effective in all the three rounds of this study. Such a pedagogical technique supports the notion that

learners can benefit from "consciousness raising" (Rutherford, 1987, 1988;
Rutherford and Sharwood-Smith, 1988). It is also consistent with Pienemann's
(1985) research on developmental sequences in language acquisition. The data also
tend to lend support to the findings of DeKeyser (1997) and reject Krashen's
(1985).

The fact that students were able to supply the correct verb tense after form-
focused instruction suggests that the instruction was effective. There might be two
reasons for this 'success' : firstly, it might be due to the selection of a structure
which was 'teachable' and secondly, form-focusing in the instructional programme.
Therefore, 'teachability' and focus on form go hand-in-hand in effective language
acquisition in the classroom.

The findings of the study suggest that teachers should use instruction which
is suitable to the students' readiness in class in order to hasten the learning
process and make it more efficient (Pienemann, Johnson and Brindley, 1988).
Therefore, L2 teachers could put more consideration into the timing, planning and
implementation of form-focused instruction or grammatical component in the
communicative classroom according to students' needs. Besides, the learner-centred
approach to grammar provides a more modern and effective alternative to
traditional grammar.

Furthermore, form-focused instruction can be adapted to a wide range of content areas or contexts to cater for the needs and interests of L2 learners just as in this case it has helped students to perform better in writing.

In Tassicker's article (1985), she supports Schumann's model of social and psychological distance (1976). Schumann says that adults are more likely to learn a language successfully if the social and psychological distance between themselves and the speakers of that language are low. In my study, I singled out the 6 students in each cycle and had the instruction class held during tutorials in a no-pressure-and-friendly environment. The positive results may be attributed to Schumann's theory but I can not be conclusive here.

This small research tends to reject the claims (such as Krashen's) about the poor record of instruction and support the claim that form-focused instruction can make a difference (Lightbown and Spada, 1989; Tomasello and Herron, 1988). However, more research in this area should be done so that more concrete conclusion can be established.

5.4 Directions for further research

Teachers quoted many reasons for not focusing on form in the process of language teaching in their classroom. Firstly, teachers who were aware of the importance of grammatical accuracy to writing but did not focus on form for

classroom purposes attributed their reluctance to many causes. Among these causes were large classes, lack of time, syllabus constraints and pressure of examinations. These were obtained when I interviewed my colleagues and six coursemates informally shortly after I had carried out my project. For details, please refer to p. 26-28 of my journal in Appendix 7. Although these were the reasons given by the teachers, it would be interesting to examine if there are any other underlying causes which have prevented teachers from adopting the form-focused approach.

Secondly, some of us have the wrong pre-conceived idea that students think grammar instruction is boring and are therefore not interested in focusing on form. However, students' feedback in this study reveals that it is not. In fact, according to Manley, J. H. and Calk, L. (1997), students are actually eager or want to learn grammar to better their command of the language. They said this after conducting a survey on teachers' and students' perception of grammar instruction.

Finally, more classroom research need to be carried out on L2 students in other situations to determine if form-focused instruction is truly effective in improving student writing. Perhaps future research can be carried out to test other grammatical items besides verb tense.

5.5 Conclusion

The findings of my classroom research support the intuitive feeling that some L2 teachers and students have, that is, grammar somehow must be part of language study. My study does have some limitations, though. Firstly, the study was conducted in one college on a small number of students only. Secondly, the background of my subjects was different from most secondary schools or colleges, as they were motivated Chinese-speaking students who realised the importance of English in their future working life.

However, MacDonald (1971) has emphasised that 'no two classrooms are the same'. This implies considerable restrictions on generalisation because every class of students is unique in their circumstances or situations.

Stenhouse (1975) also said that 'curriculum research is not fully replicable at project level, as the field situation in which the action takes place is unique. No attempt to replicate it can succeed.'

Hence, the findings of this study do not imply that it is a good representation of all L2 learners in the country or elsewhere in the world. More studies need to be done before generalisation can be established. Therefore, these findings do not intend to suggest that L2 teachers go back to traditional grammar teaching or that they make grammar knowledge the sole ingredient in writing

composition. Teachers are invited not to accept them but to test them by applying the findings to their own situations, just as Stenhouse (1975) said, '... the application of its results depends on teachers' testing its tentative hypotheses through research in their own situations.'

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