The Effect Of Pedagogical Rules On The Acquisition Of German Reflexive Verbs

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Abstract

The piece, A Different Space, is a five-page spread written in the style of a magazine feature article. The article gives a focused profile on Elizabethtown College's Bowers Writers House and its director, Jesse Waters. It explains what a Writers House is, what functions it serves, and what type of speakers it hosts. Through Waters and Jessica Lowenthal, director of the Kelly Writers House at the University of Pennsylvania, the profile also offers a comparison of a House in a relatively rural area to one in a metropolitan area. It goes over the struggles and successes of Bowers, in addition to telling stories of past speakers. The layout for the piece was done using InDesign and some of the piece had to be cut for space. The presentation itself goes over how it was decided what to cut out.

My interest in language acquisition and the effects of the pedagogical grammar rules stems from my passion for language, interest in grammar, and personal experiences as a language learner. In my experiences as a language student and English and German peer tutor, I quickly realized that few other learners also use the grammar to the extent that I do to learn a foreign language. These different approaches to language processing began to interest me because of my desire to help others learn a foreign language more effectively.

The age old debate about the most effective way to teach a foreign language is reflected in the varying forms of instruction. Some foreign language classes involve a presentation of the grammar rules and then worksheets, activities, and other drills in the hopes that the learners will internalize the grammar and be able to use it in their own language production, while other classes focus on students' abilities to communicate in the foreign language, even with errors. Many experts and researchers have differing opinions on the ability of conscious grammar knowledge to help language learners to pick up and use the language better. In the end, they all have the same goal but have different strategies for reaching it (Schultz, 2002).

Those who support grammar instruction in the foreign language classroom believe that grammar is helpful, if not necessary, for the acquisition of a second

language because grammar knowledge can help to prevent a stagnation of progress and accelerate the acquisition process (Schultz, 2002). Student comments in support of this argument include the viewpoints that grammar is the foundation on which second language knowledge is built and that all foreign language skills benefit from grammar instruction (Loewen, S., et el, 2009). On the other hand, those against grammar instruction argue that it does not contribute to communicative abilities (Schultz, 2002). Student comments against explicit grammar instruction include their preference for activities that develop other aspects of language, especially speaking, and the lack of connection between grammar and language usage outside of the classroom (Loewen, S., et el, 2009). Furthermore, some researchers assume that the processes of children's first language acquisition and adults' second language learning are similar. Therefore, like children, foreign language learners need only enough comprehensible input through language instruction in communicative contexts, as long as the learning environment is positive and without pressure. Between these two extremes, a middle position exists. Proponents of this position do not agree that processes of children's first language acquisition and adults' second language learning are the same. While not all learners may need an emphasis on grammatical forms, such attention could possibly accelerate the acquisition, especially when learners have limited contact with the target language or strive to reach a high level of proficiency. Researchers fear the development of sub-standard forms without metalinguistic knowledge and error correction (Schultz, 2002).

To investigate this question, I based my experiment on Schulz's study to investigate the relationship between students' grammar knowledge and production abilities in German. For her study, Schulz investigated the correlation between the students' ability to use the German word order and prepositions correctly and to answer questions about the related grammar rules. To assess the students' ability to use the grammar structures correctly, the students completed the sentence fragments and answered questions about the location of various items in a picture. The second part included questions about the grammar rules. The experiment revealed a positive but imperfect correlation between grammar knowledge and language production abilities (Schultz 2002).

For my study, I decided to examine reflexive verbs and pronouns because this structure is first introduced when students learn about daily activities, includes high frequency verbs in German, and differs from English. These differences between German and English require a usage of the rules. Reflexive pronouns are used whenever the subject of the sentence does the action to him or herself. However, each language may consider different actions to be done to oneself. Some verbs in German always require the reflexive pronouns, while other verbs, just like all reflexives in English, do not because the reflexive pronoun could always be replaced by a different person or object. The following sentence shows an example of the type of verb that always requires a reflexive pronoun:

Ich	bewerbe	mich	um	ein	Stipendium
I	apply	reflexive pronoun	for	a	scholarship

This type of reflexive verb does not exist in English because the verb requires the "mich" (myself), which cannot be

omitted or replaced by any other person or object. On the other hand, the sentence

Ich	schütze	mich.
I	protect	reflexive pronoun

uses the same kind of reflexive verb that exists in English. With this type of verb, a sentence with another object or person in place of the reflexive pronoun is also completely grammatical.

Ich	schütze	die	Kinder
I	protect	the	children.

In addition, German reflexive pronouns can vary their form based on their grammatical role in the sentence, also known as case. For example, the reflexive pronoun in the following sentence is in the dative case (used as the indirect object) because it answers the questions "to/for whom?"

Ich	wasche	mir	die	Hände.
I	wash	reflexive pronoun	the	hands.

When the reflexive pronoun is used in the accusative case (as the direct object) to answer the question "what?", the sentence has a very different meaning.

Ich	wasche	mich.
I	wash	reflexive pronoun.

Thus, reflexive verbs can be used in many different ways, depending on the necessity or optionality of the reflexive pronoun and the presence of another direct or prepositional object in the sentence. These differences and multiple usages make reflexive verbs a difficult structure to learn.

Before the unit on reflexive verbs, the students in an intermediate-level German class took a pretest to measure their knowledge of reflexive verbs from any previous German courses or exposure to the German language. The pretest consisted of five incomplete sentences (three of the four usages of reflexive verbs and a non-reflexive verb) that answered the question "What are you doing?" The activities were shown in the context from a "because" clause and a picture depicting the action. The students were instructed to complete the sentences. Correctly completing the sentences involved selecting the correct verb from the word bank and using the correct form of the reflexive pronoun if the verb was reflexive. The students took the posttest after the unit on reflexive verbs. The first part of the posttest had the exact same structure as the pretest, except that it consisted of ten questions. After submitting the first part, the students received the second part, which tested their knowledge of the grammar rules. The questions directly asked the students about their thought processes and knowledge of grammar.

The first analysis involved a comparison of the pretest and posttest results. A comparison of the percentage of right answers for each type of verb revealed improvement in three of the four categories that were part of both tests. In addition, the ordering of the types of verbs from most often correct to most often incorrect remained the same, which perhaps indicates that certain types of reflexive verbs may be easier for students to learn or that they were more familiar with the verbs in some categories. Finally, the most typical mistake for each type of verb remained consistent between the pretest and posttest, although the percentages of these mistakes decreased on the posttest. The overall improvement from 31% correct in the pretest to 42%

correct in the posttest showed that a combination of factors, such as the additional exposure to the language, practice with the verbs, and grammar instruction, did increase the students' abilities to use the reflexive verbs correctly.

A second analysis investigated the relationships between individual independent variables (the performance on the grammar section of the posttest, the number of German classes, and the amount of time spent in a German-speaking country) and the posttest results. The scatter graphs of these relationships showed no real correlation between any of the independent variables and the posttest results; the data points followed no particular trend.

From this study, a reasonable conclusion is that, while grammar instruction does appear to have a positive effect, it alone is insufficient to help the learners to acquire the language and to be able to consistently use the grammar structures correctly. A combination of factors, such as the grammar instruction, the practice with the structures, and additional exposure to the language, among other factors, may be necessary to help learners to acquire the target language successfully. From the teacher's perspective, an understanding of this combination of factors is vital to help students to learn the target language effectively.

References

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